DOCTOR WHO NOVELLAS

RIP TIDE

LOUISE COOPER

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FOREWORD by STEPHEN GALLAGHER

Im a sucker for the English seaside, and thats a fact.

Im not talking about golden sands, golden days, deckchairs and sunshine. I actually mean the reality of it, the cold winds and the tacky arcades and lonely beach cafés that feel like outposts of the lost. Ghosts and faded glories. Cliff paths and promenades and wooden chalets with the paint peeling off.

Just thinking about it makes me want to abandon all my deadlines, throw the dog in the back of the car, and head for the coast. Its a cold October day and theres a light rain on the skylight above my head.

Perfect.

Those golden days must have existed sometime. Such a charged present-day atmosphere has to have its origin at some point in the past; ghosts only walk where living people walked before. In my imagination that origin was in the thirties, when the Grand Hotels were still grand and the motor vehicles were works of art, when a man was embarrassed to be seen in public without his jacket and tie and everyone wore a hat. Thats where my mind places the eternal summer of the Secret Seven and the Famous Five, when Billy Bunter was at Butlins and Henry Hall was on the radio.

And thats what I find myself thinking about, when Im sitting at a formica table in some place with salt spray on the windows, drinking hot chocolate out of a thick-sided mug and listening to the pinball machine at the back of the café. Im here in the present but theres so

much more to it, only one layer deep and only just out of reach. Its all around me, and wherever I look. Its in the sea-pitted railings, its out in the boarded-up pavilion on the pier. A theatre of shadows, cast by the not-so-long-ago departed. Beyond those shadows are even older ones, of fishing boats and smugglers and wreckers with their lanterns, luring tall ships onto the rocks. It might feel like something out of Robert Louis Stevenson but it happened, and its echoes are there.

Theres a word for it, I suppose. When youre in a place or a moment that is energised by a sense of inexplicable meaning. The word is, magic.

Louise Cooper knows all about magic. So possessed was she by that of the Cornish seaboard that she not only realised a dream when she eventually moved to live there, but took it further and passed over the Southern coast for the hard-edged, rugged, sea-battered Northern shores with their Atlantic waves and Westerly winds.

Talk about taking your pleasures neat …

Her love for that environment pays dividends in the story youre about to read. It has a pin-sharp sense of place and a memorable texture of reality. Yes, reality, and yes, its Doctor Who. Theres no reason why the two dont belong together. One of the great things about this new generation of Who fiction is that it takes the character and the concept into places that, in the context of British childrens TV, the original shows makers were able to flirt with but never fully enter or explore.

It was back in 1982 when I was working on a story for the television series called Terminus that Eric Saward, that seasons script editor, mentioned that the shows drawing the highest audience-appreciation scores tended to be ones in which the Doctor either visited Earth or became involved in some part of Earths history (if Im remembering correctly Erics own debut script, the one that had put him in line for the script editors job, had been set around 1666).

Over time I began to understand the dynamic behind the notion. The strange really does become more strange and takes on a more enticing character if you place it in a context of the familiar. The more credible the context, the more gripping the weirdness. When Stephen King moved horror out of the antiquarians library and into the local supermarket, that once-despised genre hijacked the mainstream for more than a decade.

Now, Im not suggesting that every Who story should have been an

earthbound one. But the signs are that the greater sense of reality one works into the scenario, the more substantial the drama becomes. And the more substantial it is, the more affecting it can be. It isnt only a matter of locale. Even more important is the need to get a sense of reality in character, in emotional reactions, in relationships.

One area that always fascinated me, but which in my own stories I could do little more than hint at, was that of the complexity in the Doctors attitude toward the rest of us. Never without a companion, clearly in need of companionship, this inveterate loner chooses to spend his existence with a series of beings whose individual lifespans must seem, in his eyes, to pass with the brevity of a mayflys.

Even when, for once, his companion is a fellow Time Lord, their association runs its course and ends in exactly the same way as all the others.

Hes always moving on, and yet we matter to him. I can remember the discussions and the questions when I suggested that, after losing touch with Nyssa under dangerous circumstances and fearing the worst, the Doctor might express his relief with a hug when the two of them were reunited. A humane moment, an expression of affection. Did we dare to cross that line?

Well, we did it, and the sky didnt fall, and the audience feedback suggested that wed made a rare connection.

But sex? Dont even think about it.

Now, and away from the screen, Who has begun to grow up in ways that it was never allowed to before. Yes, there are the videos and the audio adventures and the Rolykin Daleks and all that spin-off and nostalgia stuff, but theres also an increasing body of prose fiction that brings a new depth and maturity to a format that demonstrates, again and again, that it has a robustness and the franchise potential to be at least the equal of a Buffy or a Star Trek. And Im not talking about fan fiction, either, but the work of professionals like Louise Cooper herself, author of more than fifty novels and a respected writer of Fantasy and Young Adult fiction.

Rip Tide carries you along with a deceptively easy style and a whathappens-next sense of story. Heres an engaging place seen with an insiders eye, and within it theres a wonder-filled strangeness lying just beyond the everyday and the recognisably real.

All that is available to you here. If youre ready to reach for it, and to believe.

Stephen Gallagher October 2002

Words cannot do justice to the reality of the seas power. A sweeping statement, maybe; but anyone who lives in close proximity to the Atlantic, with the sounds of its varying moods a constant backdrop to daily life, knows the emotions it raises in the human mind and heart. Ave, wonder, love, fear … and, perhaps above all, an innate and intense respect for a natural force that we do not and cannot control. The sea exists without regard for our opinions or desires or commands. It makes its own rules but we disregard those rules at our peril. Ask a fisherman, a surfer, a lifeguard; anyone whose living or leisure brings them into close proximity with the ocean. Ask the rescue services of the RNLI, coastguard and armed forces, who risk their lives when the sea turns from friend and provider to implacable enemy and shows us how small our place is in the real scheme of things.

Yet the sea creates echoes in us all; and, just as its tides and inclinations ebb and flow with the weather or the seasons or the phases of the moon, so the current of our human moods is driven by unseen influences. We each have our own rip tide, shifting and changing within us. And that, too, can be as unpredictable as the sea.

CORNWALL NOW

Steve had to admit that he fancied her. He noticed her when she walked past the little lifeboat station on the last strip of the narrow road that sloped down to the beach, and kept watching as she merged into the crowd of late May holiday visitors who were dithering over ice cream flavours at the café or spreading themselves and their gear on the sand. There were a lot of attractive girls around at this time of year, but this one stood out. She was small petite, almost with very long, very black hair (probably not natural, but what the hell; the effect was terrific), and she walked with a feline grace that caught the eye and held it.

Steve straightened up from the inflatable lifeboat, where he had been carrying out a maintenance check, and moved to the door of the boathouse. From here he could see the quay where the local fishing boats were pulled up out of reach of the big spring tides. Beyond the quay was a panoramic view of the beach, with the headlands high granite cliffs stark against the vivid blue of the Atlantic. But the view didnt interest him. Narrowing his grey eyes, he looked for the girl, and saw her where the road met the lifeboat slipway twenty metres away, leaning on the railing above the quay and scanning the crowd on the sand below.

Forget it, a voice behind him said sourly. Shes with someone; I saw them earlier.

Anyway, she looks as if shed eat you for lunch and throw the bits to the gulls.

Steve swung round and stared in annoyance at his younger sister, Nina.

Nina glowered back from where she slouched against the boathouse wall. Her shoulder-length blonde hair needed combing, her blue pedal-pushers and Surfers Against Sewage T-shirt werent ironed, and her face wore the sullen expression that told him she was in one of her moods again.

When I want your advice about women, little sister, Ill ask for it, Steve retorted. And Ive told you before: dont creep up on me when Im working on the boat.

You werent working. You were ogling that girl. He ignored that. What

do you want, anyway? Havent you got something better to do? If I had, I wouldnt be hanging around here, would I? Did you see her shoes? What sort of moron wears heels like that to the beach?

Steve sighed. He was fond of Nina OK, he loved her but when she was like this it was hard to remember the fact. He tried to remind himself that it wasnt entirely her fault; 17 was a difficult age and she had always been a bit of a misfit, a loner, on the edge of the crowd but never quite included. But if she would only make more of an effort.

What are you doing to the boat? she asked.

Just going over a few things before practice on Sunday morning. Trying to make peace, he grinned at her. And answering all the holidaymakers questions. Bit of PR.

Can I help?

Steve pushed a hand through his brown, curly hair, leaving an oil smear, and sighed.

You know you cant. Next year, when youre 18, you can start training to join the crew, but

Oh, great. Im supposed to go away to uni next year, in case youd forgotten! All part of Mum and Dads grand plan, isnt it? And who cares whether I like it or not?

Well, I didnt make the rules, so dont blame me! Steve changed his mind about peacemaking. This morning, it obviously wasnt worth it. Look, if youve just come here to wind me up, then Im too busy, so go away and bother someone else.

Right! She pushed herself away from the wall. Sod you, then. I know when Im not wanted.

Good. Go in the sea or something.

She took two steps away, then stopped. I just might. The waters freezing and my wetsuit leaks, so Ill probably get cramp and then youll have to turn the boat out to rescue me. Her eyes, which were the same grey as his, glinted slyly. Thatll give you something to do, instead of drooling over some up-country bimbo who wouldnt even look at you if you were…

Her voice faded as she stalked away, and the last few words were lost. Steve sighed again, turned back to the boat and came face to face with the black-haired girl.

She had moved from the railing and was standing three paces from him. Her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. But her smile was stunning.

Hi, hello, she said. She had an odd accent that he couldnt place. Italian, maybe?

With that hair, she could be.

Hi, said Steve, returning the smile. Can I help you?

I dont know. I was just looking at the … boat.

This, he thought, is a come-on. His grin became as wide as the Cheshire Cats.

Anything you want to know, just ask. Im in the crew, you see; helmsman, actually.

My names Steve.

Steve She nodded but didnt tell him her name. OK, he thought, try again. Shes known as an Inshore Life Boat. D-class; thats the smaller of the inflatable types.

Used for coastal rescues rather than deep sea; surfers in trouble, people cut off by the tide, that sort of thing

The girl interrupted. The tide. How far … out does it go?

Not much further than it is now. Thats why you have to be careful, you see. Its amazing how many people dont realise that the tide actually comes in as well as …

The practised explanation tailed off as he had the uncomfortable feeling that she wasnt really listening. Wishing he could read her expression behind those shades, he finished lamely, Are you on holiday?

Holiday. Yes. Can I get round to the next bay while the tides … out?

Sure. Over the rocks; its not difficult. But dont stay too long. No more than a couple of hours, or you could get cut off.

A couple of hours. Right She seemed to make a habit of repeating what people said to her. Maybe her knowledge of English wasnt that good. Steve was about to ask her where she came from, but before he could say it, she abruptly turned on her heels (they were ridiculous shoes for beach walking. and added, Thank you very much. You have been most helpful.

Steve began, Wait a moment. I wondered if

But she was walking away, and she didnt look back.

Her companion was waiting on the balcony of the beach café, which was built high up against the cliffs and reached by a flight of wooden steps. He made an odd figure against the brilliance of sun, sky and white paint; dressed in black, and with black hair and shades like hers, he was incongruous, not part of the scene. The girl glanced over her shoulder, saw that they were out of sight of the boathouse, and climbed the steps to meet him. As she reached him, he caught hold of her arm.

What were you doing? His voice was a whisper. He was not speaking English, or anything resembling it.

She replied in the same language, and as quietly. Finding out a few things.

You were talking to someone.

So? It doesnt matter.

It does matter! You know the rules dont get friendly with the locals!

Youre a fine one to talk about breaking rules, she retorted. Anyway, hes harmless. And he told me how to get to the next bay. Her expression changed. Wed have to go over the rocks, though. And the water will come back after a while.

Ah. The young man glanced speculatively towards the sea, hunching his shoulders a little as the onshore wind flung unfamiliar smells of brine and gorse into his face.

Unlike the gentler south, this north Cornish coast was a place of thundering surf, with no land between here and Canada to temper the raw power of the Atlantic. Even on a day like this, with the sky an unbroken blue and the sun feeling hot, the sea looked and was

dangerous. Then wed better not risk it. He rubbed his upper arms. I dont really like it here. Lets go back to our place. We can explore later, properly, when all these people have gone.

The girl seemed about to argue, but changed her mind. She too looked at the sea again and she too seemed to suppress a shiver. They walked back towards the road. At the lifeboat house, Steve had been joined by two more members of the crew; he had his head in the boats radio compartment and was swearing cheerfully while one of the others said, How the hell should I know where you put the screwdriver? You had it in your hand three seconds ago!

None of them saw the pair go past and away from the beach. But beyond the café, from a vantage point among the rocks where she was sitting alone, Nina gazed after them with resentful grey eyes. There was no moon that night, which was ideal, for what people couldnt see wouldnt hurt them. He had called her several times with a running commentary on the fun he was having; describing the stark night beauty of the coast, the sheer energy of the waves, dimly visible in starlight, as they pounded against the cliffs. He had taken one or two risks, but nothing serious; they had giggled over it like children on an escapade, and she was starting to wish that she had gone with him after all. Still, she was tired (all the holidaymakers got tired, from what she had overheard; they seemed to think it was something to do with the air), and could do with some rest. She hoped he wouldnt stay out for much longer.

When he called again, she said so, and he gave in. All right, Ill come back. I suppose I should, in case anyone sees me. Ill be there in about … His voice tailed off. There was a pause. Then he uttered an explosive oath.

What? What is it? But she could not hear his reply; the signal had suddenly begun to break up, as if something were blocking it. She shouted his name, fear rising, and his voice came back in staccato bursts.

… malfunctioning … I cant get it to …

What? she yelled at him. Whats happening? Whats wrong?

It wont … Cant pull back; its gone too far! Im heading

Static swelled and rose to a shriek, then the shriek merged into a colossal roar that seemed to slam through her eardrums. In the instant before she jerked away from the handset in shock, she heard him

scream.

After that, there was only silence.

SUNDAY

The village pundits had predicted that the weather wouldnt last, and the local radio forecasters had been inclined to agree. So Sunday morning found Steve and the crew preparing the lifeboat for practice in a rising wind with ominous clouds building to the southwest.

As it was a holiday week, more visitors had arrived in the village, but this morning most of them had taken one look at the sky and headed for the indoor attractions of the larger towns. The sea, ever moody and unpredictable, had turned overnight from blue to a cold, restless grey; a few die-hards were on the beach, hunched in coats against the wind gusting spitefully across the bay, but there was no one in the sea, and the lifeguards, dressed in tracksuits, were drinking coffee in the shelter of their hut beside the boathouse. Even the gulls werent much in evidence. As one of Steves colleagues said, it looked like they were in for a bit of a blow.

The usual, if smaller, gaggle of fascinated children converged on the lifeboat tractor as it trundled down the slipway to the beach with the boat bumping behind on the trailer, and the crew, in drysuits and lifejackets, answered their questions with patient good humour. Steve had been keeping a hopeful eye out for the black-haired girl, but there was no sign of her today. Doubtless the weather had put her off, and he couldnt help remembering his sisters comment about her being a townie. It annoyed him to think that Nina might have been right, especially in the wake of the trouble there had been yesterday evening, when she had turned up at his front door just as he was getting ready to go out. She had apparently had (another) spectacular row with their parents, and had stormed out of the house saying she was going to live at Steves flat and they could go to hell. Steve had told her in no uncertain terms that she was not going to live at his flat, and Barry, his flatmate, had hastily backed him up. So she had quarrelled with them, too, and finally had flounced off.

Steve had called his parents later and discovered that she had, of course, gone back home, and was sulking in her room. He was relieved to know she was safe, but even more relieved when she had not come slouching down to the boathouse this morning to hang around and get in everyones way. Let her have her sulks. Shed grow out of it, one day.

As they prepared to launch the lifeboat, he saw another craft out in

the bay: a squat, practical-looking little fishing boat with a red-and-white hull. Charlie Johns Fair Go; and if he narrowed his eyes he could just make out Charlies white hair as he hauled on one of his crab pot lines. Some half-dozen local men had small boats that could be launched from the beach in reasonable weather, and the fish and shellfish they caught provided useful beer money. Charlie had several pots moored to marker buoys offshore; doubtless he wanted to get his latest catch in before the weather deteriorated to the point where it would be impossible to take the boat out at all.

The lifeboat was afloat now, and Steve climbed in while the launchers held the craft steady against the tide. The 40 horsepower engine started (first time, he was satisfied to note) with a staccato roar, the other two crew members scrambled in after him, and they were off, powering through the breakers and out into the rising swell. Steve had started to train one of the younger crew up to secondary helmsman, but as soon as they reached open water he abandoned his original plan to put the trainee through his paces on a mock rescue. These conditions were too rough; the swell was heavy and the waves running in unpredictable directions. Spray smacked over the bows and into their faces, and it would be all an inexperienced man could do to hang on and maintain his station. So instead, he kept control of the helm himself, and headed towards Charlie Johns boat.

Might as well see if hes caught anything, he shouted over the racket of the engine. I wouldnt mind a spider crab, if hes got any.

The Fair Go was still near one of Charlies buoys. She was pitching, too; the swell seemed to be increasing by the minute. As the lifeboat approached and throttled down, Charlie looked round. His hair was whipping to a surf-like froth, and seventy years of exposure to salt, wind and sun had pickled his broad face the colour and texture of seasoned wood. He looked like a small childs drawing of God. But if his frown was anything to judge by, God wasnt feeling benign this morning.

Got a crane on you, boy? he shouted.

A crane? Steve grinned, then grabbed at a stanchion to steady himself as the lifeboat lifted on a cross-wave. Whatve you done; fouled the line?

God knows. Charlie was sweating despite the wind, and he gestured at the pot line.

Its snarled up, all right; I cant shift it. Feels like something big caught down there. Buggered if I know what, though.

Steve peered at the line disappearing into the seas heaving grey depths. Each time the Fair Go rose on the swell, the rope tightened almost to breaking point.

Pay it out, I would, and leave it for now, he suggested. It might free itself, especially if we get a couple of really big seas.

Charlie grunted. Or bust, like as not, and lose me a brand-new pot! No; youre right. Cant stay out much longer, anyway; if this gets any heavier Ill have the devils own job getting back. He picked the coiled line from among several large and lively crabs in a fish box, tossed it overboard and watched it sink, then smiled broadly, showing two missing front teeth. Tell you what, boy; when its calm again you can get that scuba kit of yours out and go down for a look. Might be sunken treasure, and well all be rich!

Hey! said Steve. I just saw a flying pig! But he might do it. Hadnt been scuba-ing for ages; it would make a good excuse. He opened the throttle again and turned the boat around, said, Save me a spider crab! and gave Charlie a wave as the lifeboat bounced away.

In typical British fashion, the holiday week was almost over before the weather really improved. There were two days of high winds and ferocious rain squalls during which the entire world seemed to turn to endless grey. The granite houses of the village huddled wetly under scudding clouds, and though the sea was half a mile away the distant sound of it was a constant, ominous background. Even with all the windows of his flat firmly shut, Steve could hear the breakers roaring as he lay in bed at night. Each low tide revealed a litter of seaweed and debris, and the water itself was a heaving, threatening predator, with choppy white wave-crests visible right to the horizon. The fishermens boats stayed firmly on land, and the coastguard issued warnings not to walk on the cliff paths as there was a very real danger of being blown over the edge. Each evening when he finished work, Steve went down to the beach and stood with his face to the wind, watching the sea and the very few tourists who had braved the weather to pretend they were enjoying their holiday.

Then on Thursday morning, as he was about to take his lunch break, Steves pager, which he always carried with him, buzzed loudly. Snatching it from its pouch, Steve scanned the screen and saw the words, LAUNCH REQUEST. Moments later it buzzed again, and the

message changed to: LAUNCH I.L.B.

The maroons went off with an echoing double bang as Steve turned the ignition key in his battered van, and he made it to the beach in under one and a half minutes. Two other cars were already there and more arriving as crew and launchers mustered. The wind had dropped somewhat and the sea was less ferocious, though still churning enough to promise a rough ride; Steve sent up a silent prayer that whoever was in trouble could hang on until help arrived. Then as they scrambled into their drysuits and the tractor started up, Paul, the Operations Manager, emerged from the office, where he had been in radio contact with the coastguard.

No need to rush, he said. Its not a rescue. He pulled a face. Someones spotted a body in the sea, and youve got to fish it out. Sorry, guys.

Faces fell, and someone said, Oh, shit …

Its not a false alarm, is it? another asked hopefully. The last time this had happened, the body had turned out to be a healthy and very grumpy seal.

Doesnt matter, Paul told him. Weve got to check it out, whatever it is. Pick your crew, Steve … and youd better take the body bag.

Steve nodded, understanding. He preferred not to have the youngest crewmen on this sort of job. Dealing with a corpse was bad enough under any circumstances, but if it had been in the sea for a while the task was grisly. He chose the two most experienced and hardened men of those who had answered the call, and they trooped gloomily to the beach in the lifeboats wake.

Nina, in waterproofs and sandals, was on the beach. She had come running down when the maroons were fired, and she intercepted Steve as he walked across the sand.

Whats the shout? she wanted to know. Her face was eager.

Steve paused and looked at her. He had not seen her since their argument over the weekend, and he wasnt overly pleased to see her now. Someones dead, he said curtly. Weve got to go and pick up whatever the rocks havent battered and the crabs havent eaten.

Ninas expression changed. Oh … I didnt realise.

No. Well, you wouldnt, would you? Id go home, if I were you. If

theres anything to see later, it wont be a barrel of laughs.

He left her standing there and walked on.

The operation took an hour, and was as unpleasant as the lifeboat crew had feared. It was no false alarm; they found the body rising and falling on the swell among a cluster of rocks, face down in the water and with arms and legs trailing like strands of uprooted wrack.

Retrieving the corpse from a sea like a roller-coaster and with rocks too close for comfort took a heavy toll on the crews nerve. One of them, for all his experience, was sick when he saw the bloated face, and when the worst was over and the seas victim zipped away and out of sight in the bag, they turned the boat around and headed back to the beach with sombre faces and hearts.

A police car and an ambulance were waiting on the slipway, and so were a good number of curious spectators. The crew and the ambulance paramedics evaded their questions, and the lifeboat station press officer

who, fortunately, had been at home when the call came told everyone that a statement would be made later, but for now it would be most helpful if they could stand well clear and let the teams do their work. Steve saw Nina among the gathering; her face looked small and pinched, and despite his earlier annoyance he wanted to say something reassuring to her. Before he could, Paul called him in to the boathouse.

You OK, mate? he asked.

Steve nodded. Ill do.

Yeah … You said over the radio that from what you could make out its probably a male, and young. Any clue who he might be?

No. Steve grimaced. I shouldnt think his own mother would recognise him, the state hes in. He must have been in the sea a pretty long time.

The police want a word with all of you when youve changed. Just the routine stuff.

Right. Steve started to unzip his drysuit, then stopped and shut his eyes briefly, pinching the bridge of his nose. Paul clapped him on the

back.

Ill go and put the kettle on, he said.

The ambulance drove away, the crew gave their report to the police, and in what seemed a pitifully short time the whole thing was over, at least for the present.

Identification and enquiries were still to come, of course, but now there was nothing more to do except hose down and refuel the lifeboat, and go home.

Nina came up to Steve as he emerged from the boathouse with a cup of tea inside him and easing the queasiness in his stomach. She looked up at him, her eyes huge and dark, and said, Im sorry Ive been a rat bag.

Doesnt matter. He put an arm round her shoulders and she hugged him.

Was it very awful? she asked.

He shrugged. Could have been worse.

Poor guy. I wonder who he is? A visitor, maybe, and he didnt listen to the high wind warnings. Do you think he fell off the cliff?

Steve, though, wasnt listening. Instead he was staring over her head and past her, to where a footpath led away from the road and followed the line of the cliffs. A solitary figure was standing there, and though the distance was too great for him to be absolutely sure, Steve thought he recognised the black-haired girl who had spoken to him at the weekend. He had not seen her since, and had assumed that she had finished her holiday and gone home. Clearly she hadnt. But it struck him as odd that she should turn up now … and odder that she should stay over there on her own, rather than coming down to see what was going on.

Nina, he said, you know that girl I was talking to the other day?

What? Nina was thrown by the change of subject, then remembered. Oh, yes. The one I was rude about. Her eyebrows lifted in tacit apology. What about her?

You said she was with someone. What did he look like?

Umm … cant remember, really. I dont think Id know him again; anyway, he was wearing shades, like her. Oh, but I did notice one thing his hair was as black as hers: She glanced curiously at him. Why? Oh, nothing.

Just an idle thought. Come on Ill give you a lift up to the village.

The girl was no longer on the path when he looked again. But Steve was beginning to wonder if he ought to have another word with the police.

Because, unless its colour changed when it dried out, the hair of the dead man they had pulled from the sea had been very, very black.

NEXT WEEKEND

By Saturday evening the body in the sea had not been identified and no one had been reported missing. Steve had told the police officer in charge of the inquiry about the black-haired girls companion, but the girl herself had not been seen again. That in itself could be a cause for suspicion, the officer said, and efforts would be made to find her. In the meantime, they would see what they could do with dental records, and so on, before the inquest took place.

The lifeboat crew were subdued by the incident, and thankful that there were no further call-outs that week. The wind dropped and the rain squalls moved on, though it was still cloudy, and by Friday the sea was calm enough for the fishing boats to go out. Steve finished work at four, and at four-thirty he drove to the beach with his scuba equipment, for an appointment with Charlie Johns.

Charlie was already there when Steve arrived, and so were Tim and Martin, two of the lifeguards, also with full scuba kit. Within half an hour they were launching Fair Go into the surf. Charlie, at the tiller of the outboard engine, looked his usual weathered-old-salt self, but the three younger men looked more like something out of a science fiction movie. Tight neoprene suits, fins and masks Hello, the Martians have landed! Charlie said as they strapped on their air tanks. Houston, we have a problem!

Youll have a problem if there are any more bad jokes like that, Tim warned him, grabbing at the gunwale as a wave broke under the boats keel and she pitched like a fairground ride. Martin looked ahead at the sea and said, That waters going to be cold when we get down. This had better be worth a dose of pneumonia!

Martin was a born pessimist, never happy unless he had something to grumble about.

The others ignored him, and Charlie steered the boat towards the marker buoy bobbing on the swell.

Keep her hove-to, and well try hauling the line, Steve told him.

A few yards of rope came in, then the whole line tautened and jammed.

Still stuck, said Charlie. Thought as much. Going down, then?

OK. Steve sat on the gunwale and adjusted his demand valve and mask. All ready?

Right go!

The three of them dropped backwards into the water, upended and plunged beneath the surface. Familiar noises winked out breaking waves at the tideline, the slap of water under the Fair Gos keel, voices from the beach like gulls heard in the distance and abruptly there was only the muffled and more intimate sound of deep water moving, and the bubbling sighs of expelled air as they breathed steadily, regularly through their valves. Steve could feel the strength of the current carrying him sideways as he moved downwards, and he kicked out more firmly, compensating.

There had been some tricky tides in the past week or two, and the fishermen said that an underwater sandbank had built up a little way down the coast, which could give rise to some hazardous rip currents. But the three knew the waters, and knew their skill.

His eyes behind the mask scanned the strange, quiet world around him. The sea was normally pretty clear hereabouts, but the recent storms had churned the bed, and detail was harder to make out. The weather had also brought rafts of seaweed in from the deeper regions; a mass of wrack drifted silently past, for a few moments obscuring Steves view of his companions, and among its tangling fronds he glimpsed the darting movements of fish. Another, smaller bulk moved at the limit of his vision; more weed, or possibly a seal, idly curious but not interested in coming too close. It faded into the murk, and as it vanished he saw the snagged pot line, a silvery umbilical cord slanting up through the water. He signalled to Martin and Tim, they signalled back to show that they had seen, and all three converged on the line.

An experimental tug achieved nothing; a second, harder pull only dragged the marker buoy down an inch or two before it resisted. Martin shook his head and made a downward gesture. Steve and Tim nodded, and with a common purpose they started to follow the line towards the sea bed.

On the surface, Charlie had taken out his tobacco tin, made himself a roll-up and was sitting smoking it, gazing back at the beach and thinking his own thoughts. He had just thrown the spray-dampened end overboard when with a small triple splash three heads reappeared.

Its jammed, all right, Tim took out his valve and trod water. You know whats snarled it? Bloody great lump of metal! Looks like a bit of a ship, though I couldnt tell you which bit:

Either that, said Steve, or a piece of worn-out equipment that got dumped overboard from a tanker or something, to save them having to pay for disposal. He looked around him at the swell, rising and falling, and suddenly thought what it must have been like for the drowned man, struggling alone in the sea.

He pushed the thought away, resisting the impulse to shiver. Well have to cut the line, he told Charlie. Well try and get the pot back for you, but I cant promise.

OK, said Charlie with a sigh. He reached down for his gaff hook. Give me a minute to get hold of the buoy, then I suppose youd better go for it.

Steve grinned a response and they all dived again. Down once more, following the lines bright trace, and in a short time the source of the trouble was visible on the sea bed. They hadnt investigated it too closely the first time, other than to confirm that the crab pot was jammed there. All Steve had seen through his mask was what looked like a piece of twisted metal, about the size of a small car, half buried in the sand. Now, Tims knife blade gleamed and the taut line slackened and started to drift away. Steve swam closer to the mysterious object until he was able to make out its structure more clearly.

It was metal of some sort, there could be little doubt of that, and there were no barnacles on it, so it couldnt have been there long. An exploring dogfish, like a miniature shark, flicked out from between two struts and streaked away with a wriggling movement as Steve reached out to touch the wreckage. A bit of a ship, Tim had suggested to Charlie. Steve didnt think so. It looked wrong; too small for one thing, and too intricate. Could be junked equipment of some kind, but as to what, he couldnt begin to guess. If it had come from something deep-sea, though, the recent currents must have been colossally powerful to have carried it this close to shore.

The crab pot was there, but it was badly damaged. A large hole had been ripped in one side, and any crabs that might have been in there were long gone. But new pots were expensive, and Charlie might be able to repair this one, so, signing to Tim to help, Steve eased and rocked and fiddled with the tangled mess, until at last the pot came

free. A cold current washed past as he lifted it clear of the wreckage, and he felt himself being drawn by the moving water, a gentle but insistent tugging that tried to pull him away from the debris on the sea floor. The current stirred up more sand; a shoal of fish swept by mackerel possibly, though it was difficult to be sure for they were no more than a dim smudge in the gloom and Steve realised that he was starting to feel the effects of the waters cold. He would have liked to examine the wreckage more closely, but these were far from ideal conditions, and the stirring of the sea bed gave everything an unreal, nightmarish edge that was spookily disorientating. His companions, he thought, would be unwilling to stay. And the idea of diving alone gave him a frisson that had nothing to do with the physical chilling of his flesh.

There was nothing more to be done, so they turned towards the surface. Steve felt foolishly glad to see the light increasing as they rose, and when his head broke from the water, the brilliance, despite the days cloudiness, seemed dazzling.

He took out his valve, breathed salty air and hoped that neither Martin nor Tim noticed his sigh of relief. Charlie was looking expectantly at them from the Fair Go, and Steve dumped the pot over the gunwale and heaved himself into the boat. Sorry, mate, he said. Its a bit the worse for wear.

Oh, well. Charlie was philosophical. Win some, lose some. Thanks for trying, anyway.

As Fair Go headed for home, Tim and Martin were telling Charlie more details of the wreckage on the sea bed. Steve, though, was studying the broken crab pot, and suddenly he reached inside. There was a small, silver-coloured object in there: stainless steel or chrome by the look of it, about the length and thickness of his thumb, and perfectly cylindrical. It bore no markings of any kind.

He pulled off his wetsuit gloves so that he could feel the object. It was cold, and very smooth. He held it out to show the others.

Thats a rum thing, said Charlie. Cigarette lighter, could it be?

Tim shook his head. Nothing to press. It looks a bit like one of those address tubes you can get for dog collars, only bigger.

Dyou reckon it came off that wreckage? Tim asked.

I shouldnt think so, said Steve. The only thing it could be is the barrel

of a lock. But theres no keyhole. He weighed the object in his palm, then handed it to Charlie. There you are: souvenir of the adventure. You could make it into a pendant.

I might at that. Charlie made jewellery in his spare time and sold a few pieces at the local craft shop. He pocketed the cylinder, then, as they came in to shore, turned his concentration to getting the boat safely through the surf.

Friday was the night when people went to the pub to celebrate the end of the working week, and by eight-thirty Steve and most of his friends were in the Huers Arms, which was in the middle of the village and a conveniently short stagger home. The bar was lively with locals and visitors. In one corner a group of girls were giggling while a middle-aged holiday couple at the next table frowned their disapproval at the noise. The girls were eyeing a solitary man who sat near the window: a slightly eccentric-looking individual, probably in his mid-thirties. They tried to attract his attention, but he had his nose in a book and didnt so much as look up at them through the curls of his unfashionably long brown hair. At the bars far end, beyond a haze of tobacco smoke, a three-piece band were setting up their equipment.

Steve spotted Nina with two of her friends; she saw him, pointedly indicated the fact that she was drinking a Coke and nothing stronger, and stuck her tongue out. Their paths didnt cross until later, when Steve, coming out of the gents, met her going to the ladies.

Still sober? she asked, then grinned to show it was a joke.

Yeah. Steve rubbed his palms against the legs of his jeans, then winced. Whats up? Then she saw his fingers more clearly as he flexed them and said, Something the matter with your hands? Uh? No. They just itch a bit: Nina took one of his wrists and turned the hand over. That doesnt look like nothing, she said. What have you been doing?

Extraordinarily, Steve hadnt even noticed the marks until that moment, but she was right: both his palms were covered with a red rash, and in places the skin was actually blistering.

You ought to tell Victor to get some better soap in the gents, Nina said. Victor was the pubs landlord. That looks horrible. Does it hurt?

No-o … Though now she mentioned it, there was a soreness.

Id put something on it, if I were you.

You sound like Mum! Dont worry; itll go. Probably something I was using at work.

Sue them, then; I would, said Nina doggedly. Its the in thing. The compensation culture.

Yeah, yeah. You try it once youre out of college and working, thats all I can say.

Go on, go to the loo and stop fussing.

They went their separate ways, and after a couple more beers Steve forgot about the rash. None of his friends seemed to notice, and by the time the band had packed up and Victor was firmly telling the stragglers that hed lose his licence if they didnt go home, he was mellow and yawning and, as he didnt have a particular girlfriend at the moment, looking forward to his bed for the sheer pleasure of a sound nights sleep.

The hand that held the device was shaking, and if she didnt make it stop, she was likely to cut herself badly. She set it down for a few minutes and performed a mental exercise to calm herself It worked, not perfectly but well enough to steady her, and she picked up the implement again and held it to the side of her own head.

The blade sliced silently and easily through the black hair, and in a short time the bulk of it was lying at her feet. When the job was done she felt cooler and more like her real self; all the same there was a faint pang of sadness at seeing the great mass of hair go. She had enjoyed the novelty of it. But the thing had to be done.

The grief inside her was still like a hard, tight knot as she prepared for the second phase of the transformation. She could not cry, but she hurt, hurt, hurt, and a succession of if onlys paraded through her mind in a dismal procession. If only he had not gone out. If only the failure had not happened. If only she had gone with him, been there; perhaps she would have been able to do something.

But he had gone, and it had happened, and she had not been there. She needed to be strong; not just for his sake but also for her own. What needed doing, she must do alone. They had ignored one of the major rules, scorned what they saw as the set attitudes and rigid thinking of the rule-makers. And now that this hideous thing had happened, she could not go back. Well, perhaps it was a kind of rough justice.

Perhaps it was no more than she deserved.

Yet there had to be a chance … hadnt there? She couldnt give up. He would not have wanted her to give up. However afraid she was, however great the grief inside her, she had to carry on, and try to find a way.

A strange, thin howling sound tried to rise up from her throat and her hands started to tremble again; ferociously she brought herself back under control and the noise and the shaking subsided. Stage two. She had enough of the hair left on her head to pass muster; all that remained was to make the other change. A small, vacuum-sealed pouch was beside her. She picked it up, broke the seal, and drew out what looked like a pair of thin red plastic gloves. She put on the gloves, then slowly and carefully began to smooth both hands over her scalp. Over and over, she worked with methodical concentration, as her newly shorn hair began to change colour.

A FEW DAYS…

Small communities tend to have efficient grapevines, and by the start of the following week the body in the sea was the talking point of the village.

The victim was male, and was young, but he had still not been identified. That was not necessarily unusual; what did capture the interest of everyone, however, was the growing rumour that there was something not quite right about the body. Someone whose brother-inlaw worked in the local hospitals pathology department started the ball rolling in the Huers Arms one night, and it wasnt long before the story began to build up. Apparently, the medics who had carried out the postmortem had discovered that the victim had been suffering from some kind of degenerative illness, though

according to the brother-in-law they had thus far been unable to identify it. And that wasnt all. The young man appeared to have undergone some kind of cosmetic surgery, and that quite recently: though, again, the exact procedure, and the techniques used, were unknown to the hospital staff. The inquest had been postponed while more tests were carried out, and the tale was embroidered as people formed and aired their own theories. The obvious answer, most agreed, was that the dead man was probably American well, cosmetic

surgery was a big thing over there, wasnt it; and their technology was real state-of-the-art stuff, and cost a fortune into the bargain. American, and rich: that was it. That, though, wasnt exciting enough for some, and the wild idea that he was the result of some of genetic experiment soon began to circulate. He had probably escaped from a high-security military base (the arguments as to where and how were an interesting diversion, if not really relevant) and you could lay odds that any day now the body would be spirited out of the mortuary in the dead of night and some tightlipped Ministry bigshot would slap a D-notice on the whole thing.

By Thursday the body had not vanished, and neither the Army nor Ministry nor anyone else of note had put in an appearance. The village was undaunted. Gossip spiralled, interest flowered, and with another weekend approaching everyone was looking forward to Friday and Saturday evenings in the pub exchanging the latest news, real or imaginary.

The local press hadnt caught on to the rumours or, if they had, had dismissed them but in the early part of the week the lifeboat press officer had been kept busy.

Requests to interview the crew were politely refused, but a statement giving details of the recovery operation was issued, together with photographs of Steve and his colleagues with the boat, and the media were satisfied. When the papers came out, a lot of money was put into lifeboat collecting boxes in the district it always happened when a rescue was publicised but, beyond the village boundaries, interest soon began to die down.

With two exceptions.

Nina encountered both on Friday afternoon. Sixth-formers were not expected to do all their studying in school but were trusted to spend some time working at home. Nina should have been revising, but with the weather sunny and the sea blue and inviting, she was spending the day on the beach, school books replaced by a surf board and a feminist novel. Holidaymaker numbers had dropped somewhat after the holiday week, but the beach was still quite busy and a few of the fishermen were working on their boats, ready to go out at the weekend. Charlie Johns wasnt among them, which was surprising as Charlie rarely missed a chance to fish, but then Nina remembered hearing that he had gone down with one of the summer flu bugs that always seemed to crop up around now, and was laid up at home.

She spent most of the morning sprawled on a spread towel in her bikini, trying to read the novel (which she wasnt actually enjoying, but battling through it was a matter of principle). Then, just as she had finally reached an interesting chapter, a shadow fell over her and an unfamiliar female voice said, Excuse me please …

Nina rolled over. For a moment the figure silhouetted against the sun looked strange, as though something about her proportions wasnt quite right. Then Nina blinked, the illusion vanished, and she was looking up at a perfectly ordinary, petite, red-haired girl.

Yes? Irritation at being interrupted, made her voice aggressive.

The girl smiled. Im sorry to bother you, but one of the lifeguards pointed you out and said you might be able to help me.

Nina was surprised and puzzled. How? she asked.

Well … I understand that your brother? is a member of the lifeboat crew.

Nina sat up. Thats right, she said cautiously.

Hi. Another smile. She was a bit of a stunner, Nina had to admit. The hair wasnt much; obviously dyed, and very badly cut, but she had a fabulous figure, and there were gold flecks in her unusual green eyes. For a moment it occurred to Nina that she might have seen her somewhere before, but she dismissed the thought. She would have remembered that godawful haircut, if nothing else.

Were you looking for Steve, or something? she asked.

Steve?

My brother. In the lifeboat crew?

Oh of course. Yes. You see, Im a journalist. I heard about the … incident here a few days ago, and I wondered if it might be possible to meet the people who were involved.

Ah, right. Have you talked to the lifeboat press officer?

The girl looked baffled. Im sorry?

Hes the guy you have to talk to first if you want to know anything about the lifeboat shouts.

Shouts.

Call-outs. Nina smiled with a slight air of superiority. Youre not from any of the papers round here, are you?

No. I work for a national publication

Really? Interested, Nina interrupted. Which one?

and they didnt tell me who to contact. But really, I dont think the press officer could help me. I need to talk to someone who was actually there.

Oh, I see. The human angle, and all that kind of thing? She probably worked on one of the tabloid womens pages, Nina thought, and she wanted to ask Steve about his emotional reactions: Steve, our readers need to know: how did you feel when you saw that bloated corpse floating in the water? and so forth. She knew Steves opinion of that sort of journalism, and could vividly imagine what he would say if the girl launched questions like that at him.

A small demon came to life inside her. The tabloids were always like this, werent they: hassling people, prying, anything to get their human interest story. Well, then; let her have it. Point her at Steve. Shed get a few answers she wasnt bargaining for, and serve her right. Why not?

She gave the redhead a very sweet smile and said, My brothers at work at the moment. But he finishes early on Fridays, and he usually comes down to the beach. If you come back at … say, four-thirty, he should be here.

Four-thirty. Right. The journalist smiled back. Thank you very much. Im grateful.

She walked away in her townie clothes, and Nina rolled over to continue sunbathing.

She felt much less ruffled now, and she would love to be a fly on the wall when the journalist encountered Steve.

It occurred to her briefly that the redhead didnt seem to have any reporters equipment with her. No tape recorder, not even a notebook. Nor a bag where they might be hidden, either. She probably thought they would scare people off to start with, and shed be bristling with technical gizmos when she came back. What the hell.

Nina yawned and cast her book aside as the suns heat and the ceaseless, rhythmic sound of the waves made her start to feel drowsy. She was, in fact, almost nodding off to sleep when someone kicked her ankle.

What She shot up with a flurry, and was just in time to see a man regaining his balance after tripping over her outstretched legs.

Im so sorry! He righted himself and backed up the words with an equally apologetic movement. Im afraid I wasnt concentrating I simply didnt see you! He was an odd-looking character, dressed in a loose cotton shirt and trousers and with a floppy white sun-hat on top of light brown hair that curled softly down to his shoulders and gave him the look of a Victorian poet. Hard to tell his age; he could have been anywhere between twenty-five and forty. But his smile was genuine and his manner very polite.

Thats OK, said Nina.

Really? Youre not hurt? No broken bones?

She laughed. Of course not! But thanks for asking.

He seemed about to move on, then paused. Are you local?

Yes. What the heck was this? she wondered. Another reporter? Two in one day was pushing it.

But he said only, I thought so. Youve got that wonderful tan that lasts all the year round. I do envy you. Im only on holiday, Im afraid. Just arrived.

Really? said Nina. I thought you must be another journalist.

Another? Sorry, youve lost me.

Oh, never mind. Its just that there was some red-haired woman asking questions a few minutes ago … Then she realised that he couldnt possibly be interested, and if he had only just arrived he probably didnt even know about the recent incident.

It doesnt matter, she said. Itd take too long to explain.

Of course: He was scanning the beach, not looking at her any longer. Then abruptly he seemed to remember that she was there. Giving her another smile, he said, Sorry again to have disturbed you: He held out

a hand with a white paper bag in it. May I offer you a jelly baby, by way of recompense?

Jelly baby? Er … no, thanks. Under her breath Nina added, Ive heard about your sort before.

The man didnt appear to hear that. He tucked the bag into a pocket, said, Ah, well.

Time flies, and so forth. I must get on. Goodbye.

Barking, Nina thought. Totally barking.

She went back to her sunbathing.

The red-haired girl was waiting when Steve arrived at the beach, and intercepted him as he walked past the lifeboat house. Steve was surprised and flattered to be sought out, especially by someone so good-looking, and agreed at once to the interview. They stood in the sunlight by the boathouse door as people passed by in both directions.

Steve made no attempt to hide the fact that he was attracted to the girl, and she in turn appeared to respond. OK, he told himself, she was a reporter and she obviously knew how to use charm to get under peoples guard and persuade them to say more than they should, but what did that matter? He was shrewd enough not to fall for the ploy, and if it led to a bit of fun, so much the better.

For a while he simply answered her questions, directly when they were innocent questions, more evasively when she began to probe. No, as far as he was aware the man they pulled from the sea hadnt been identified yet, and no, he had no idea when the inquest would be held. When she asked, What are they doing with his body now? he was nonplussed, and pointed out that he was a lifeboat crewman, not a pathologist. At that point he nearly fulfilled Ninas predictions, but the girl hastily changed tack and instead asked things such as where the body had been discovered, where they thought it had come from, whether they had found anything else during the rescue. If he had been concentrating on the questions rather than the questioner, Steve might have thought a lot of her queries distinctly odd. As it was, he didnt notice. In fact, it didnt even register on his mind that she had no tape or notebook and wasnt recording his answers in any form whatever.

Finally she ran out of questions and said, Well, thank you, Steve. Im grateful to you. Its been very interesting.

A couple went by, towed by a large and badly-trained retriever straining at its lead and with tail wagging madly. And for me: Steve smiled. But do you know what? You havent even told me your name yet.

Oh … Havent I?

No. He waited, ignoring a toddler with an ice-cream cornet who paused to stare at him, and when nothing else was forthcoming prompted, Well?

Well what?

Whats your name?

Oh, I see … Yes. Its There was a pause, and for a moment her green-gold eyes seemed to lose their focus, as if she was thinking about something else entirely.

Then she said, My names Redruth.

Steve burst out laughing. The toddler ran away and its parents looked up. A man with long hair, who had the look of an eccentric poet or academic, was also passing by; he paused, his glance intent for a moment, then moved on towards the sand. Unaware of him, the girl stared at Steve in confusion then suddenly she realised that she had made a mistake. Redruth wasnt a name for a person. It was the name of a place, a town. She had seen it on the map; it wasnt far from here. Though her face didnt show it, she was alarmed, and furious with herself for the blunder. But why was he laughing? Laughter was a sign of amusement, whereas she had expected instant suspicion.

Then Steves laughter subsided and he said, Sorry I didnt mean to laugh, but I like that. Youre actually called Ruth, right? But because of your hair, someone tacked the “red” on to it. Good joke. He smiled again. Hello, Ruth.

She laughed, too, because he had and so it was clearly the right thing to do.

Inwardly, her mind flicked over the information she had painstakingly memorised. Ruth was a legitimate name for a person. That was why she had made the mistake; the two words were similar, and she had momentarily confused them. She felt huge relief that no irreparable damage had been done.

Look, Steve said, You cant be heading back to your office, or wherever youre working from, at this time on a Friday. Why dont you let me take you for a drink?

She put her head on one side, considering, and he thought briefly that she seemed familiar somehow. Had they met before? No, he would have remembered her. Yet there was something about her that struck a chord of recognition.

Then she said, Where?

Well, I usually go to the Huers Arms. Thats up in the village. Have you been there?

No, she said.

Youll love it. Its got loads of character, and the beers good. Come on we can drive back in my van.

Ruth laughed again. All right, she said. But Im buying.

He wasnt going to argue with that, so he led her up the road to where his van was parked. As they went he noticed a solitary individual, in loose clothes and with long hair escaping from under a floppy sun hat, clambering around among the rocks on the far side of the beach. The tide was coming in, and for a moment Steves training took the upper hand and he wondered if he should alert the lifeguards. But then he reasoned that they must have seen him for themselves, and anyway the stranger wasnt going very far; in fact he had stopped and was bending over to examine a rock pool.

He even had a bright pink fishing net in his hand, so either he had an interest in marine biology or much more likely was an eccentric who wasnt too self-conscious to play on the beach as happily as a child.

He dismissed the stranger from his mind. But as he and Ruth walked away, the man on the rocks straightened, watching them go. His eyes were thoughtful. Then he turned away from the rock pool and started back towards the beach. Victor was gratifyingly goggle-eyed when he saw what he later (and privately) called Steves catch of the day, and asked with exaggerated politeness what she would like to drink.

Oh … nothing for me, thank you. Ruth smiled at him, then at Steve. Im on duty. A soft drink? Victor suggested. She shook her head. No, really. Nothing.

Thank you. But give Steve whatever he likes.

Not entirely pleased to have one order where he had expected two, Victor pulled Steve a pint of bitter, and watched as he and the girl went to a corner table where, disappointingly, they could not be overheard. The bar was all but empty this early in the day (the only other customer was a long-haired stranger nursing a ginger beer in one corner) and for the moment Victor had nothing to do, so he resigned himself to desultorily polishing glasses until something happened to make him stop. He only wished he could lip-read.

Ruth bought Steve a second pint, and then a third with a chaser, but when they were finished she said she must be going. He privately hoped that she would accept an invitation to meet him again later, but when he asked she said apologetically that she would be busy tonight. Work to do, a deadline to meet he knew the sort of thing. Hoping that she wasnt simply making excuses, he persevered and said that he would like to see her again. She hesitated. Then: Id like that, too.

Great! Steves face lit up. How about lunch tomorrow?

I … cant make lunch, Im afraid. But maybe later? We could meet on the beach.

All right. Three-ish?

Fine. She smiled. See you then. Goodnight, Steve.

She held out a hand and he had shaken it before it occurred to him what a strangely formal gesture that was. It also occurred to him, later, that she had offered her left hand rather than the traditional right. Odd. Maybe she was left-handed? Not that it mattered. At least, he thought, that rash had disappeared; if she had taken his hand and felt that, it wouldnt have done much for his chances.

The world looked blurred around the edges and he realised that he was marginally drunk. OK, hed walk home; Victor wouldnt mind if the van stayed in his car park until tomorrow. He hadnt meant to drink that much, certainly not at this time of day, but somehow he had not noticed how many rounds Ruth was buying. Well, not rounds, exactly, because she hadnt had a single drink, nothing at all. Journalists tactics? She had certainly asked him a lot of questions, though he couldnt now recall most of them, nor the answers he had given. The thought flittered through his mind that maybe he had told her more than he should have done about the incident with the body in the sea. But … he was fairly sure … yes, he was sure that most of their talk

had been more general, about tides and sea conditions and the coastline and things like that. Nothing that could land him in trouble later. Fine. And he was seeing her again tomorrow. Great!

He walked up the side lane that led to his flat in a mellow and expansive mood but the mood evaporated when he saw Nina drooping against the wall beside the street door. One look at her face told him all he needed to know.

She said: Hi. Can I come in and chill for a bit?

Why? Steve asked suspiciously.

She shrugged. I just feel like it.

Dont tell me. Youve had another row with Mum.

Nina gave a heavy sigh. Yeah. She just wont listen, and she doesnt understand, and She stopped. Youre drunk.

Dont be so stupid.

You are! I can smell it. Did you take that tabloid bag to the pub? She saw his surprise and grinned sourly. I know you were seeing her, because I talked to her on the beach and she asked me where she could find you.

So what if she did? Secretly, though, Steve was pleased to discover that Ruth had been actively looking for him. Ill take whoever I like for a drink without asking your permission, thanks! Anyway, who says Ruth works for a tabloid?

Oh, shes called Ruth, is she? Nina pounced on the snippet of information like a cat on a mouse. Who does she work for, then? Steve opened his mouth to answer, then realised that Ruth hadnt actually said. Its none of your business, he told his sister. It is, if shes going to make up a load of rubbish about people and print it, Nina retorted. I dont like her, and I dont trust her.

You dont even know her, said Steve. He was close to the end of his tether and decided suddenly that enough was enough. Look, Ive got better things to do than stand around in the street arguing with you. Im going indoors, and Im going to have a shower, and then Im going to watch a video. So no, you cant come and chill, and Im not going to make peace with Mum for you. Do it yourself. Now, go away.

He thought she might start shouting at him it was one of her attention-seeking strategies but instead the fight seemed to go out of her and she visibly deflated.

Perhaps she really was feeling down. Ought he … ? Then he thought he saw a glint of calculation in her eyes, and an inner voice said firmly, no. What was that song: Wont Get Fooled Again, that was it. He knew Nina too well.

She saw he knew what she was trying, and gave up. But as she turned to go she said, By the way, someone said old Charlie Johns is really ill. Steve stopped with his door key half in the lock. Charlie? I know. Its one of those flu things.

She shook her head. No, I mean really ill. Had the doctor out and everything. I thought Id tell you in case you want to go and see him. But youve got a crap video to watch, so you wont want to bother, will you?

She strode off, and Steve blinked as he got his head round that sudden and unexpected parting shot. Charlie, really ill? It sounded unlikely, and Nina loved dramatising things. All the same, he should find out; maybe go and see him, as she had bitchily suggested. Yes. Charlie would hate being laid up; hed probably be glad of a visitor.

He would pop round tomorrow, before he went to meet Ruth.

He opened the front door to his flat and went in.

SHOCK

The lifeboat crew trained weekly in the summer months, so Sunday morning of the following weekend found Steve unlocking the boathouse ready for the arrival of his colleagues. It was a fine day and the sea calm, but unusually none of the fishing boats was out nor any being prepared. A few people were standing around near Charlie Johnss Fair Go, but Charlie wasnt among them. In fact, Steve realised, he didnt recognise some of them. And they were oddly dressed for the beach, in dark, sober clothes.

An inkling of the truth suddenly hit Steve, and with a liquid sensation in his gut he started towards the quay. He was intercepted by Martin, the lifeguard. One look at Martins face was enough.

Oh, God, Steve said. Charlie

Yesterday. Heart attack, as far as I know. Martin nodded over his shoulder towards the soberly dressed group. Theyre his family from up-country. Daughter and son-in-law and so forth.

Oh, shit. Shock, sorrow and guilt hit Steve in a powerful mixture. All this past week he had been meaning to call on Charlie. But he had put it off; he had thought Charlies illness wasnt serious. And now it was too late.

Therell have to be a post-mortem, Martin said gloomily. Seeing as it was so sudden. I mean, everyone thought it was just that bug thats been around. People dont die of things like that, do they?

No. But if it was his heart… The words trailed off and Steve sighed heavily, shaking his head. He always seemed so fit.

Yeah. Mind you, he was getting on a bit, wasnt he? Martin sighed, too. Poor old bugger. Hell be missed. Then he glanced up the road. Here come the first of your crew. Better tell them.

Yes. It wasnt something Steve relished. Yes, I will.

The training session was a cheerless exercise, and no one felt like staying around afterwards. The bereaved relations had gone by the time the boat was put away, but as Steve was about to leave, Gus Trevorrow, who had been Charlies long-standing friend and drinking partner, approached and asked him to call at the house later in the

day.

Theres something Charlie wanted you to have, boy, he said. His sea-blue eyes were red rimmed. I dont know what tis; familyll tell you. Come round about four, all right?

Steve said all right but couldnt bring himself to ask Gus all the questions about Charlie that he wanted to. The news was spreading by the time he got back to the village, and three people phoned him during the afternoon to see if he had heard.

Ruth did not ring, though. Not that he had expected her to; they had met up once more since the first time in the Huers, and she had promised to see him again. But she hadnt given him her number and he didnt know how to contact her. He would have liked to talk to her now. He would have liked to be with her.

At three forty-five he changed his shorts and T-shirt for something more appropriate and walked to Charlies bungalow on the small estate at the edge of the village. The door was answered by a balding, fortysomething man who said he was Charlies son-in-law and thank you for the condolences and please come in. The living room was gloomy, the curtains half drawn, and Charlies daughter, Liz, whom Steve had never met before, was serving tea to several of Charlies closest friends and their wives, while two early-teen children Charlies grandkids, presumably sat fidgeting and bored in a corner.

Its only a small thing, Liz said, smiling tiredly at Steve. But apparently Dad told his friends that he wanted you to have it. He said youd know what it was about.

She went to the sideboard and fetched something wrapped in tissue paper. Unfolding the paper, Steve didnt realise what he was looking at for a moment, but then he recognised it. It was the strange metal cylinder that they had brought up from the dive when the crab pot line became tangled. At the time he had said semi-seriously that Charlie should make a pendant from it and he had. The cylinder was now held in a beautifully worked copper cage, and the cage was attached to a looped chain.

It was the last thing Dad ever made, Liz told him. He was really pleased with it, apparently, and he wore it himself. But he wanted you to have it.

Steve blinked against a sudden stinging in his eyes and looked up from the gift. Are you sure? he said uncertainly. I mean, if he liked it … you might want to …

well, maybe it should…

Be buried with him? No. He wouldnt want that. Hed rather it was here, being seen and appreciated, than … Her voice caught and she waved a hand, leaving the rest unsaid. Have it, Steve. As a keepsake.

Thank you. Blinking again, Steve slipped the chain over his head. The cylinder in its mounting rested against his breastbone and he fingered it. Itll be my first family heirloom. God, what a crass thing to say! But Liz seemed to appreciate it.

We dont know yet when the funeral will be, she said. Theyre going to carry out a post-mortem.

Someone mentioned that, said Steve. But I thought it was just a heart attack? Oh

Sorry I dont mean just (well done, Steve, size 9 right in it!) that is

I know what you mean. Liz, he thought, must have a wealth of patience. Well, yes, as far as we know, it was. But Dad had never had any heart trouble before. And there were one or two odd symptoms: She frowned. His hands, for instance. They were covered with a rash of some kind. Apparently it started when the flu bug did. The doctor gave him all sorts of creams but they didnt have any effect. So they just want to make sure that there couldnt have been any contributory cause.

Im sorry, Steve said. That must be very hard for you.

Oh, its all right. They have to do these things, dont they? And it cant matter to Dad any more.

She offered Steve tea but he thought it was more tactful to decline, and he went home feeling heavy-hearted. She would let him know, she had said, as soon as a date was fixed for the funeral, and he had told her that the lifeboat crew would be there in full measure. Charlie had been a crew member years ago; it was the very least they could do. In the meantime … well, life had to go on. At least he had something concrete to remember Charlie by. He would wear it whenever he could, he resolved. He would treasure it.

The post-mortem on Charlie Johns was completed within a few days, and the coroners verdict was recorded. A heart attack; nothing more complicated than that. The rash was a mystery, but the pathologist had said that it could not possibly have contributed in any way to the fatal seizure. The body was released, and the funeral took place in the small Victorian parish church on a Monday morning, nine days after Charlies death.

The lifeboat crew were there, as indeed was just about the whole population of the village as far as Steve could tell. Even Nina turned up, in a calf-length black skirt and dark grey jacket and, to Steves greater surprise, Ruth was also among the mourners. He saw her in the churchyard as he arrived, standing apart from everyone else. She was wearing very formal black, and he excused himself from his colleagues to go and speak to her.

Ruth! They hadnt met since Charlie died; she had rung him once, but that was all.

Hello, Steve. She looked tired, he noticed. I thought it would be all right to come. I hope no one minds.

Im sure they wont. Did you know Charlie?

She shook her head. No. But its … the thing to do, isnt it?

He was so glad to see her that he didnt really notice the oddity of that comment.

The hearse arrived then, and a single bell began to toll mournfully, summoning them all into the church. The crew went in together and Steve managed to find a place at the end of a pew, where there was room for Ruth to sit beside him. Nina, three rows behind, had seen Ruth and noticed the attention Steve was paying her, and as the coffin was brought in to the quiet strains of Jesu, Joy of Mans Desiring, she fixed a gimlet stare on Ruths back, as if trying to bore right through her. What was that woman doing here? She had no connection with Charlie; no connection with the village at all. Had Steve invited her? If so, why? We dont want her here, Nina thought fiercely. Shes an intruder, the wrong kind of outsider. She must have finished her article by now, whatever it is. Why doesnt she just go away?

The fact that she knew the answer to that question was an additional goad. Just look at Steve dancing attendance on Ruth; giving her a

service card, finding the right page in her hymn book … It made Nina want to puke. And Ruth had really dressed the part, or rather, overdressed it; right to that dinky little bit of black veil on her hat. Even her face was funereally white. Make-up, probably. She hadnt looked that pallid before.

Or maybe the pallor was something else … Nina frowned, then hastily got to her feet as the organ started up for the first hymn. As the congregation began to sing Eternal Father, Strong to Save they always had that one when there was any connection with the sea her mind roamed again over the niggling thoughts that had been bothering her for the past few days. There was no doubt that Steve wasnt his usual self. All right, she hadnt seen much of him lately, but that made it all the more noticeable when they did meet. He seemed to be abnormally tired; the energy and sparkle that were so much a part of him just werent there at all. Shed heard that he had missed lifeboat training yesterday. That wasnt like him. And she had noticed something else those blisters on his hands had come back. Nina hadnt mentioned them, and neither had he. But she had seen them. And something similar had happened to Charlies hands before he died. Nina was starting to get worried. She didnt know what was wrong with her brother. But she had an immovable gut instinct that, somehow, there was a connection with Ruth.

The organ swelled to the chorus: O hear us when we cry to thee, for those in peril on the sea. Peril on the sea. Why did those words suddenly make her shiver? Uneasily Nina looked around her at the singing congregation, then her gaze travelled towards the door.

And froze.

At the furthest end of the rearmost pew, shadowed by a lily-filled urn, a man was sitting. His clothes were darker and more formal, and his hat was different, black and with the brim turned down over his eyes. But she couldnt mistake that Byronesque hair, and the set of the shoulders, and every instinct she possessed set up a tingling alarm. For Ruth to come to the funeral was one thing. But him?

The singing ended and everyone sat down as the vicar began his address. Hastily Nina followed suit. She didnt think the man had seen her staring; certainly she hoped he hadnt, for the last thing she wanted to do was alert him. But as the service continued, she frequently and surreptitiously glanced over her shoulder, to make sure he was still there. Something was going on; she was certain of it now. Something that involved both the jelly-baby man and Ruth. And she

was going to get to the bottom of it. Whatever it took.

Steve had not noticed the stranger at the back of the church. He was trying to concentrate on the service while at the same time helping Ruth, who didnt seem to know what to do with the books and sheets of paper that had been given to her as they came in. She had looked intently at her hymn book through the singing but had not joined in, and though she was now studying the order of service card, he had the impression that she wasnt really taking in what she read. He wondered if she was ill. She was abnormally pale, she kept shivering, and once he had seen her sway slightly on her feet, as though she were about to faint. He had whispered, Are you all right? and she had nodded, but Steve wasnt convinced. He kept a concerned eye on her as the service continued, occasionally (and unconsciously) rubbing his itching palms on his trousers. The rash had come back and was now starting to affect the skin below his throat, as well. He ought to see the doctor about it, really; get something to put on it. He wondered idly if it was the same thing Charlie had had, and if so, how they had both got it. Most likely something in the sea; maybe a tanker illegally dumping its chemical washings overboard to be brought inshore by the tide. It happened every so often, and then the surfers and lifeguards grumbled about sore eyes and skin problems after long sessions in the water. Not that he had heard any of them grumbling lately, but … He swallowed a yawn that was trying to escape. God, Im knackered. Seem to have done nothing but sleep every spare minute Ive had for the past few days. Overwork, he told himself. Ought to ask for a rise; claim wear and tear. Ha, ha.

The service ended at last, and as the bell tolled again the congregation left the church just in time to be met by a squally shower. Charlies family and closest friends got into three black cars and set off behind the hearse for the cemetery two miles away, and everyone else walked the short distance to the Huers Arms to drink a farewell toast to Charlie. Nina looked for the jelly-baby man, but he had disappeared. She hung around for a few minutes, wondering if he was still in the church but not wanting to go back in, in case he saw her. He did not appear, and eventually she gave up.

The rain was stopping as she walked away. And just inside the church porch, Ruth breathed a sigh of relief that she hoped Steve would not see. All right, now? he asked anxiously.

Yes. Yes, Im … fine. She smiled at him. Im sorry about that.

You had me worried! He smiled back. I thought you were going to

pass out completely and Id have to call an ambulance!

No she started to say sharply, then relaxed as she saw he was joking. No, she repeated more quietly. I just felt … giddy for a moment. Its passed now.

Youre not ill, are you? You look very pale.

Do I? Theres nothing wrong, honestly. She hoped he would believe the lie. Has the rain stopped?

Steve stuck a hand out of the porch. Yes. I can even see a patch of blue sky.

Good. Forcing down her fear, she made herself step outside, and relief came a second time as she found he was right. She had had to think fast a few minutes ago, and was thankful that she had thought of faking the dizzy spell. It had distracted Steve and given her the chance to stay inside the church until the shower passed over. The last week had been dry, and as a result she had forgotten about rain. She would have to be doubly careful from now on.

What are you doing now? Steve asked as they walked up the path to the lych gate.

Ive … got to get back to the office.

Oh. Havent you even got time for a drink? Just a half? She hesitated, then: Id love to, Steve, I really would. But I must get back. Maybe later this week? Great.

Give me your number; Ill call you tonight and well fix something up. Ruth smiled.

Ill call you. Its easier; I never know where Im going to be. Goodbye. She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. It was the most she ever did, but to his own surprise Steve was happy to be patient. It was just the way she was; just Ruth. And he liked her enough to be content with that.

He went into the Huers Arms as she walked away up the street. And Nina peered out from the side lane where she had been waiting. She looked one way to make sure that her brother was safely inside the pub, then she looked the other way, at Ruths departing back. She waited until Ruth turned the bend in the road and disappeared, then, quickly and quietly, she started to follow.

QUESTIONS

Though she wasnt consciously aware of it, Nina had the makings of a good detective, because above all she was observant. And four more days of observation resulted in some jigsaw puzzle pieces that started to fit together in a disturbing way.

First and most worrying of the pieces was Steves health. Nina had used all her guile to ensure that her path and her brothers crossed as often as possible, and she was in no doubt now: something was definitely awry. As well as the tiredness, and the blistered hands that still showed no sign of healing, Steve was developing a noticeable pallor. He was losing weight, too. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing; he liked his beer and it wouldnt hurt him to drop few pounds. But this loss was fast. He was starting to look gaunt; hag-ridden) the old people of the village would call it. When Nina tried, once, to tackle him about it, Steve only laughed and said she was imagining things; he was fine and stop fussing, she was getting worse than Mum. That comparison was guaranteed to shut Nina up and she didnt try again.

But the worry continued to nag.

The second piece of the puzzle was Ruth. She still spent a lot of time hanging around the village, and the beach in particular. Nina often saw her there when she was studying at home, though she took care not to let Ruth see that she saw. Ruth still wore all the wrong kinds of clothes for the beach, and she didnt do any of the usual beachy things like sunbathing or surfing or exploring rock pools. She just stood around staring at the cliffs and the sea, or sometimes wandered a short way along the cliff paths that branched off from the approach road.

Occasionally she would venture out on the sand towards the tideline, but she never went close to the water and was very careful to avoid the stream that ran to the sea down one side of the beach. Nina, noticing that, wondered at it. All right, maybe Ruth didnt want to risk ruining her smart shoes. However, Nina was convinced that there was more to her aversion. It was almost as if Ruth were afraid to get her feet wet.

Ruth usually left the beach area at about four-thirty, which was half an hour before Steve finished work and was likely to put in an

appearance. It struck Nina that this might not be a coincidence. She didnt know how often Steve and Ruth were meeting, but she had the impression that from Steves point of view Ruth was proving frustratingly elusive. He was keen on her, no doubt of that; she, though, seemed to be avoiding anything more than an occasional encounter. This suggested to Nina that she had an agenda she didnt want Steve to know about.

Nina had also failed in her attempts to find out whether Ruth was staying in the village, and if so, where. Following her after Charlie Johns funeral had proved disappointing; Ruth had merely been shopping, and after half of hour of hanging around on street corners Nina had given up. Now, two days later, she was trying again. The foray began well enough: on leaving the beach, Ruth walked past the car park and up the road for a hundred yards or so, before turning off on a footpath that led to a row of holiday chalets and the wilder cliff land beyond. Nina tailed her at a careful distance, but somehow before they had even reached the first chalet, Ruth gave her the slip. Quite how she did it Nina couldnt for the life of her work out, but she did, and when Nina cautiously approached the chalets and looked around, it was obvious that they were all occupied by families with young children, making it highly unlikely that Ruth was staying in any of them. She hadnt the least idea where Ruth could have gone, but whatever the truth of it, Nina was outfoxed.

She returned to the beach, annoyed by her defeat. Then as she passed the lifeboat house she saw a familiar figure in the distance … and the third piece of the puzzle suddenly slotted into place.

If she was adding up unlikely coincidences, Nina thought, then the fact that the jelly-baby man was on the beach yet again had to be the unlikeliest coincidence of all. As usual he was scrambling around the rocks with his pink fishing net, pretending Nina didnt believe for one moment that it was anything other than pretence to fish in the pools. She stopped by the boat house and watched him with narrowed eyes. He definitely wasnt fishing. Look at the way he kept pausing and surreptitiously glancing up. He was scanning the cliff path, waiting for something or someone. Nina would have taken any bet that he was keeping an eye out for Ruth.

She delved into her memory, trying to recall exactly how often the jelly-baby man had happened to be on the beach at the same time as Ruth, and came up with the answer she had already half expected: almost without exception, he was there whenever she was. All right, if he were on holiday if then there was nothing unusual about his

visiting the beach every day. That was what holidaymakers did. But his timing was another matter. There could be no doubt of it: he was spying on Ruth. But why?

All manner of possibilities came into Ninas mind, and she realised that trying to guess the answer to that question was a pretty pointless exercise. What she needed was facts. If she couldnt get them through Ruth, then maybe the jelly-baby man could provide them instead. How to approach him, though, that was the problem. She could, of course, be absolutely direct and blunt about it, but she was honest enough to admit to herself that she didnt have the courage. Not knowing his motives put her at a disadvantage; might even put her at risk, and anyway, Nina was in the habit of taking an oblique approach to most things. Cynical it might be, but in her experience subterfuge usually worked better than openness.

She chewed over the problem during the next twenty-four hours. At one point she almost decided to drop the whole thing after all, why should she give a damn about Ruth and whatever game she was playing? It was none of her business, and she really had far better things to do. But the feeling was short-lived. It was her business, because she loved Steve, and Steve was ill, and even though she had no evidence yet Nina was unshakeably convinced that Ruth was in some arcane way the cause of his problems. If, as she believed, the jelly-baby man knew (or at least strongly suspected) what was going on, then he had to be her next target.

Nina went to the beach again the next day. The Cornish weather was being its typically unpredictable self. After Charlies funeral there had been several days of unremitting sunshine, but now, abruptly, it had changed again. Low pressure had come up from the southwest overnight, and the sky was a solid grey blanket with darker, fast-moving tatters scudding beneath it like smoke on the strengthening wind. The sea looked bad-tempered, with a heavy chop, and curtains of squally rain were moving up the coast. One squall blew in as Nina walked down the last stretch of the tarmac road, and as the rain began she ducked into the shelter of the beach shop that stood beside the lifeboat house. The squall was ferocious but short-lived; in minutes it was past and gone, leaving the road with a wet, sullen shine, and Nina emerged and walked on down to the sand.

The beach was all but empty. No rugs, towels, colourful windbreaks; just a holiday couple bundled in waterproofs and staring disconsolately at the sea, and a woman walking a dog near the tides edge. No Ruth. No jelly-baby man, either, and Nina felt a pang of

disappointment. Now that she had made the decision to target him, she wanted to do it now, without any delay and before she could lose her nerve. But he wasnt here.

Was he? Wait a minute … whos that by Blue Rock? The tide was low, and on the far side of the beach a large, wedge-shaped outcrop had been exposed, with a tumble of boulders behind it. Someone was clambering over the boulders; like the holiday couple he was wearing waterproofs, and their colour blended in with the surrounding stone, so Nina had almost missed him. At this distance and in those clothes it was impossible to identify him with any certainty. And the jelly-baby man was usually on the other side of the beach. But there was something about the way he moved…

Nina stared hard, cursing herself for not borrowing her fathers binoculars. The distant figure was straddling two rocks now, and peering into a pool between them.

Then he straightened. And Nina felt a quick, sharp thrill of triumph as she saw the bright pink fishing net in his hand. So, then, he was here, but Ruth wasnt. This change of habit forced

Nina to revise her view that he was only pretending to explore the rock pools. He was looking for something. What, though?

For several minutes she dithered between courage and cowardice, wondering whether to make a direct approach and ask him straight out what was going on. In the end, cowardice won and she merely continued to watch, ignoring two more brief but ferocious squalls that swept in from the sea. The jelly-baby man was working his way thoroughly and methodically from pool to pool. Every so often he dipped the pink fishing net down into the water, brought it up again and carefully examined the contents, but he obviously did not find whatever he was looking for. Then, just when Nina had almost decided that nothing was going to happen and she might as well go home, he gave up. The tide had turned, and the incoming sea was starting to surge into the pools, slapping and swirling over the lowest of the rocks. Another squall came in, and by the time it passed, the jelly-baby man was back on the sand and coming in her direction.

Not wanting to be seen, Nina went quickly back into the beach shop as he approached.

She bought a chocolate bar and a packet of crisps, then hung around near the counter until she judged that he must have gone by. As she

cautiously emerged she saw his back view heading away up the road, using the pink fishing net like a hikers pole.

She pulled up the hood of her anorak, and started after him.

Ruth felt the shivering beginning again, and ferociously she set her mind to combat it. But it was becoming hard; the bouts were happening more and more frequently, and each one took a further toll on her energy. She knew she was seriously weakened. And she knew that she must do something about it soon, or she would pass the point of no return.

If only she could get warm. It was, she knew, purely a result of the sickness; she had all the heating and clothing she could possibly need. But despite them, there was a relentless, aching ice in her; a cold that seemed to penetrate to her innermost self and that nothing could alleviate.

From here she couldnt see the outside world, but she knew that the squalls were still coming in from seaward, one on the heels of another.

She did not know, could not begin to guess, how long it would be before the weather changed. Before it became dry again and she could venture out. She had seen people in clothing that protected them from the rain, and had wondered … then acknowledged that it was too great a risk. She could only wait. There was no other choice.

Ruth did not have the ability to cry. Tears, anyway, would have been worse, far worse, than the sickness that was slowly but inexorably sapping her life force. But she could feel the pain of grief, and it was in her now, like a cancer devouring her from within. And fuelling the grief and making it immeasurably worse was the heartbreaking misery of facing up to the fact that she was responsible for a tragedy that should not have happened, and she didnt want to believe it had happened, and she couldnt bear to believe it had happened.

Outside, another squall swept the coast, and the voice of the blustering wind seemed to echo in her skull. She sat, shivering. She waited. There was nothing else she could do.

INVESTIGATIONS

It seemed that the jelly-baby man really was just an ordinary holidaymaker. Nina trailed him up the beach road for a quarter of a mile before he turned in to the first of several letting cottages that were separated from the road by a tangle of trees and bushes. From behind a dripping hawthorn Nina watched him unlock the cottage door and go in. A light came on, and a minute or so after that the sound of Radio 4

wafted from one of the windows.

Nina withdrew to the road, feeling disappointed and baffled. She had been so sure that the stranger had some kind of hidden agenda, and to find him behaving like a perfectly ordinary visitor threw her theories into confusion. She had expected all right, it was melodramatic, but she had expected to discover that he was holed up in a secret hideout or something, where no one could see what he was getting up to.

This was too pedestrian. Too normal.

Though, of course, she had only seen the situation from the outside.

A light had come on in an upstairs room now, suggesting that the cottages occupant was probably changing into dry clothes. A quick foray would only take a few seconds.

Just look through the window, then away. Nina slid behind the hawthorn again, then squeezed painfully; this hawthorn was particularly prickly through the gap between it and a shrubby and equally wet escallonia, and into the cottages front garden. From here she could approach the building at an angle that would hide her from view if the jelly-baby man should happen to look out. Gliding towards the nearer of the two downstairs windows, she saw with an excited frisson that the curtains were closed. Closed. In daylight. Her pulse quickened; she moved closer

The front door of the house opened, and the jelly-baby man emerged.

Nina shot back into the gap between the bushes with the speed of a cat. There was a rustle, a shower of water drops, a snapping of twigs she couldnt help it and, on the doorstep, the jelly-baby man paused and looked up. Holding her breath, frozen, Nina stared wide-eyed as he peered in her direction. She was certain he had seen her.

But after a moment or two he merely shrugged, muttered something (it sounded, ludicrously, like Ho, hum), put a bulging supermarket carrier bag into the dustbin and went back into the house, closing the door peaceably behind him.

Still holding her breath, Nina slunk out of the garden as quickly as she could without risking more noise. Back on the road she finally allowed her lungs to release their pent-up air, and stood for a few moments shaking with reaction. That had been far too close for comfort. If she were going to try again and after that experience, it was a major if then she must wait until she was utterly certain that he wasnt there. Next time she saw him at the beach, maybe. It was the only safe option.

Her legs still felt unsteady as she started to walk back to the village, and by the time she was half way up the long hill her thoughts were pendulum-ing between self-pity and the feeling that she had made a complete fool of herself. All right, then.

Sod Ruth. Sod the jelly-baby man. From now on she was going to leave them to get on with it, whatever it was, and ignore the whole situation. She wasnt interested in any of it. She wasnt interested in anything.

A car was coming up behind her, revving hard and making heavy weather of the hill.

Nina paid no need until a horn tooted, then she looked over her shoulder to see Steves old van approaching. He pulled up (she almost heard the engine sigh with relief) and said, Want a lift?

In her present mood Ninas instinct was to say no, but at the last minute she had the sense to acknowledge that a ride was better than walking. Besides, she could see yet another squall coming. She got in, and said tersely, Cheers.

Been down the beach? Steve asked.

Yeah.

Bet there arent many people there in this weather.

No.

Whats the surf

like?

Lousy.

He eyed her sidelong as he got the measure of her mood, and didnt say

any more. They reached the top of the hill and he turned the van towards their parents house. Then suddenly Nina said, You look awful! Thanks a bunch! Steve grimaced. Cheer me up, why dont you?

No, seriously! Her tone suddenly and unexpectedly changed, and when he looked at her again he saw to his surprise that her expression was stricken. Her eyes searched his face, darting, worried. I mean it, Steve. Somethings wrong with you. And your hands She pointed to them where they held the steering wheel. Those blisters arent getting any better!

Oh, for Gods sake … Steve didnt know why her concern annoyed him, but anger flared instantly, out of his control, and he snapped, Ive had enough of this! Every time I see you, you start on at me how many times do I have to tell you, theres nothing wrong!

She said, There is, Then, before she had the sense to stop herself, added, And its got something to do with Ruth! The van tyres squealed as Steve trod hard on the footbrake, and they

jolted to a stop in the middle of the road. What, he demanded in a dangerous voice, is that supposed to mean? Nina realised that she had made a major tactical mistake, but it was too

late to retract. Setting her jaw she said, Youve only started getting like this since you met her! Like what? The danger in his voice was increasing. Tired all the time. Pale. Thin. Ill. Thinking that she might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb now, Nina took a deep breath. I think you should stop seeing her! Right. Steve glared furiously at her. Out. What?

I said, out. Right here and now. Im not driving another millimetre with you in my van. You can walk home, or wherever else youre going. In fact if I were you Id go straight to Doc Powells surgery and tell her youre ill. Mentally. She stared at him in dismay, all her bravado crumbling.

Steve, I Im not listening! Not until you stop acting like a pathetic, spoiled brat! Im not! Nina was on the verge of tears.

Oh, sure youre not! Ruths put your nose out of joint, hasnt she? Shes older than you, and shes better looking than you, and you dont like it. Youre just plain jealous, Nina. Well, you can go away and be jealous somewhere else. Youre just my kid sister, and you dont run my life!

He leaned across her and opened the passenger door. Nina started to protest again, but a car had come up behind them and hooted. There was nothing she could do other than get out of the van.

Steve

He slammed the van door, which didnt shut properly (it never did) and drove off. The waiting car went past; its driver, a stranger, grinned knowingly at Nina and she gave him two fingers in response. She was crying now, but the rain had started again and the tears didnt show.

Bastard, she said. Bastard! But she didnt mean it. Steve wasnt himself; he had changed. Something had changed him. Ruth had changed him. And Nina was beginning to feel very frightened.

She made her decision at that moment. But she would wait until after dark before she did anything about it.

By dusk the rain squalls had moved on, but the wind had risen to a near gale. The sea was roaring again, almost howling, and the noise seemed to match Ninas turbulent state of mind as she lay on her bed trying to force herself to relax.

A clattering from the kitchen below told her that her mother was washing up. That was supposed to be Ninas job, and doubtless there would be words about it later. But right now Nina couldnt think about anything except her plan, and the frustration of waiting for darkness to fall. It came so slowly in June; it would be ten oclock, she surmised, before she dared make any move. Come on, come on! At least the sky was still cloudy, so there would be no moon. Could she go now? She flicked her bedside lamp off and looked at the rectangle of her window. The street lamps had come on. Ten minutes to walk to the holiday cottage, or fifteen if she took her time. She couldnt wait any longer.

Her father saw her as she passed the open sitting-room door on her way through the hall, and frowned.

Where are you going?

Out. It was her standard response, and the expected question followed it.

Where?

Meeting some mates.

Oh, I see. So what happened to the washing up you were supposed to be doing?

Yeah, well … Nina shrugged and started quickly for the front door.

Now, look, young lady, this is getting beyond a joke But the doors slam was his only answer.

Though she tried to make herself dawdle, Nina took less than her estimated ten minutes to reach the cottage where the jelly-baby man was staying. There was still an annoying amount of light in the sky, so rather than risk venturing into the garden she walked to the beach to look at the sea. Massive waves were driving in, pounding the cliffs with a deep, booming thunder, and the spray that fountained up from them gleamed eerily phosphorescent in the gloom. There was no one else around, and Nina stayed watching for some minutes, calmed by the hypnotic sight and sound of the tide.

But after a while the imperative of her task started to tug at her again, and she turned and walked back up the road, trying not to notice the uncomfortable quickening of her pulse as she neared the cottage.

There was a light on in one of the downstairs windows, but the curtains were closed, as they had been earlier in the day. From the shelter of the escallonia hedge, Nina waited, listening intently for any sound from inside. There was nothing, and she began to hope that maybe the jelly-baby man was out, and had simply left a light on for security. Well, there was only one way to find out.

She eased from the bushes and tiptoed across the short stretch of wet grass to the window. Still no sound, and, encouraged, she pressed herself against the wall beside the window frame. By sheer good luck there was a gap between the curtains; only a few centimetres but enough to allow her to get a glimpse of the room beyond. OK: here goes …

It was a perfectly ordinary room, in a perfectly typical holiday let. The

walls were painted white (boring, but cheap), with just a few framed prints of local views to break the monotony. A lamp stood on a small table, its yellow shade softening the glare of the bulb. But Nina didnt notice any of these things. Eyes round as saucers, she was staring, transfixed, at the object that dominated in the centre of the room.

It was completely insane. There should have been a table there, or an armchair, or … anything but the crazy, unbelievable sight that confronted her. She thought: Ive got to be dreaming. Im not really here; Im in bed and asleep, and this is NOT real.

The old-fashioned police telephone box was, impossibly, there.

Nina took a step back, questions rioting wildly in her head. What, in the name of every barking mad god that had ever existed, was a phone box doing inside a holiday cottage? How had anyone got it in through the door? And why, why, why would they want to put it there in the first place?

Struggling with her own disbelief and trying to think what to do, she backed off another step.

A finger tapped her on the shoulder as a familiar voice said equably, Hello again.

Can I help you at all?

ANSWERS

It was both corny and childish to scream, but Nina screamed nonetheless, lurching round at the same moment. The jelly-baby man withdrew his hand as if he had been stung, and the finger that had tapped her shoulder went swiftly to his lips.

Shh! Please we really shouldnt disturb the neighbours. He smiled a smile which, even in the darkness, looked charming. Im so sorry to have startled you, Nina. It is Nina, isnt it?

Y… She couldnt get the complete word out.

Oh, good. Another charming smile. As we seem to be introducing ourselves properly, Im the Doctor.

A doctor… Nina was still so shocked that what he had said didnt really register.

Something else did, though, and the panic flared again. How did you know my name?

Who told you?

I really cant remember. Someone, I expect or perhaps I simply overheard it. He paused. Would you like a cup of tea? Or something stronger?

No! The word came out as a squeak and she tried to get herself under control. No.

Honestly. Th-thanks. I … Id better go. Yes, I was just passing, you see, and

I dont think you were. Were you?

She swallowed and didnt answer, but her gaze darted past him as she assessed her chances of making a run for it and getting away before he could react. He must have seen the glance, for he moved slightly to one side apparently casually, but it didnt fool Nina and effectively blocked her escape route. He smiled a third time.

But this smile had a serious note underlying the charm, and his eyes were suddenly intent as he continued, I think you came for a reason. And I think though youre at liberty to correct me if Im wrong that it

has something to do with the person who calls herself Ruth.

Nina said: Ah …

For a second or two they held each others eyes. His, she noted on a half-conscious level, were a green-grey, like the sea in a restless mood. They were very striking, highly intelligent eyes, and something in their look told her that there was a great deal more to him than his surface flippancy suggested.

I think, he said, that it might be a good idea if we levelled with each other.

Nina opened her mouth to say that she hadnt the least idea what he was talking about then hesitated. Far from being angry or threatening, he had taken her spying in his stride and implied that if she were honest with him, he in turn would be honest with her. Information. Answers. Wasnt that what she wanted? And now that she was recovering from her initial shock and fright, and could take in his appearance more detachedly, she thought that he was rather handsome. All that gorgeous, curling hair … his nose was too long, but he had a lovely smile, and those eyes … Her sense of romance, which was never far from the surface but usually ended up being squashed by circumstance, started to uncurl in her mind, and rather to the surprise of her more cynical self she heard her own voice say, We-ell …

Tea? He indicated the cottage door. Though I say it myself, I brew a mean Assam.

Or Ive got a bottle of a very good Syrah, if you like red, that is. I found it in the village; that late-night store of yours has an excellent selection.

The glow of being treated like an adult and offered wine came close to undoing Nina altogether; but just in time common sense intervened. Good-looking he might be, but he was still a completely unknown quantity, and she wasnt going to be such a fool as to take him on trust.

For the first time she managed a smile, though it was cautious. Thanks. But I dont think so:

He looked baffled for a moment, then comprehension dawned. Of course silly of me.

I can hardly expect you to walk into my parlour, as the spider said to the fly.

What?

Never mind. Its an old rhyme, you probably dont know it. In that case, can I take you for a drink at the Huers Arms?

Safe enough, but Vincent was the biggest gossip in the village. Besides, Steve might well be in the pub, and he was the last person Nina wanted to run into.

She said, Id rather not go there. A hesitation, then a diffident shrug as an alternative came to her. Theres a new bistro in the village. They stay open late, and you dont have to eat

The Jango? I know it. In fact I had a meal there the other day, which was very good indeed. Have you eaten? No, but Neither have I. So its dinner for two, and Im buying. Come on, before they run out of all the best dishes!

When her spinning mind slowed down enough to allow her to think about it, Nina honestly didnt know how it had happened that she accepted his invitation and, ten minutes later, was being escorted with disarmingly old-fashioned courtesy through the door of the Jango, at the other end of the village from the Huers Arms. The bistro was busy, but mainly with holidaymakers; most locals couldnt afford the prices, and Nina had a pang of conscience as a young waiter, whose tan and salt-bleached hair suggested that he spent all his daylight hours surfing, showed them to a corner table. Then she reminded herself that her companion was probably wealthy, and she took the chair he pulled out for her and sat down.

Her companion. He had already ordered wine and was now studying the menu, and she eyed him surreptitiously through lowered lashes. Now that her rational, sensible self had finally had time to take the upper hand again, she was starting to recall a few significant and worrying facts that had been buried under the general confusion of the past half hour. All very well to get fantasy-romantic because she had walked up the road on the arm of a good-looking guy (he had insisted on taking her arm

another weirdly dated thing) and was being taken out for dinner at the most expensive place for miles. fine. Great. Fantasise away, Nina. But where the guy himself was concerned, Nina had some very immediate questions to which she wanted very immediate answers.

Her companion put down the menu and said, The Barbary Duck for me, I think. I cant resist that cherry sauce. Oh but are you vegetarian? I wouldnt want to offend you.

No. Not very, anyway I mean, I dont eat red meat, but Then suddenly the whole conversation seemed like a red herring (no pun intended, she told herself) and she sat back in the chair and gave him what she hoped was a challenging stare. Look, this is nuts! Her hand came down hard on the table; nearby heads turned curiously and she made herself lower her voice. I mean, thanks for buying me dinner and all that, but who the hell are you?

He smiled that smile. I told you. Im the Doctor.

Yeah, I know that, you said youre a doctor. But what of? Medicine? Philosophy?

Spin?

None of those and a little of all of them. Im not a doctor of anything, in the usual sense. Its … well, for want of a better explanation, its my name. Or at least, its what everyone calls me.

Doctor?

Yes.

But it isnt a name, is it? You must be called something else.

No.

Peter. Or David. Or … She tried to find something less mundane, that suited him better. Tristram?

What about John Smith? he asked with a smile.

Just, Doctor?

Yes. Smile again. Sorry.

Ohh … She was about to add an expletive but remembered in time where she was.

All right. All right. If you say youre called Doctor, then Ill call you it, even if it makes me feel like a prize prat. Anyway, thats not the important thing

He interrupted. Absolutely. Names are merely convenient labels.

Yes. Probably. She flapped her hands. Look, will you let me get to what I want to say!

Of course. Sorry.

Right. Nina drew a deep breath and wished she went to yoga classes, which were supposed to help at times like this. OK. Right. I want to ask you another question.

Ask away.

Stay calm. I saw into the room. At your cottage. There was something in there. You know what Im talking about. Her head came up and she glared at him. Whats it doing there, and how the hell did you get it through the door?

He said, I didnt. Getting it through the door would have been a logistical impossibility. And as to what it is … For the first time since she had begun to observe him, he looked very slightly at a loss. It really is very hard to explain, especially when the whole concept of the TARDIS is probably quite new to you. Oh oh, yes, thank you, I think were ready to order. The surfing waiter had returned, set down an open wine bottle and two glasses, and was hovering. Barbary Duck for me, please. And for you, Nina?

Nina hadnt even glanced at the menu but was staring at him over the top of it. She didnt seem to have heard, and the Doctor prompted gently, Nina? Food?

Uh? She blinked as the question and the waiters presence registered. I …

Anything. The same. Yes; the same. Fine.

And new potatoes and mixed vegetables for two. Thank you. The waiter went away, and Nina glared at his departing back as though he were a deadly enemy before leaning across the table and hissing, TARDIS?

Maybe, the Doctor said gently, it would be better if we approached this another way, and began with the matter of Ruth

Yeah? Im starting to think that maybe itd be better if I got up and walked out of here, right now.

Why? Do you think Im an escaped lunatic?

It was exactly what she did think, but the directness of the question threw her.

Seeing it, he smiled and poured wine for them both. Try that. Good for breaking the ice. Then well discuss Ruth

Nina obeyed before she knew it, picking up her glass and taking a decorous sip. Very nice This is getting seriously unreal. Look

Im not an escaped lunatic, and I promise that in time youll understand all the …

peculiarities of this situation. But I do need help. Because I have good reason to believe that Ruth or whatever her true name is could be putting certain people here in danger:

Those words changed everything for Nina. Feeling as though she had suddenly swallowed an ice dagger, she stopped with her hand half way to the glass again, and her tension was palpable. Danger? she repeated, very softly.

Yes. Im sorry if it sounds over-dramatic, but Im not exaggerating. Ruth doesnt belong here, you see.

I could have told you that! Shes a complete townie

No, no. I mean it much more literally. She does not belong on this planet, Nina. She is not human. She is not from Earth, but from what you would call an alien world.

What? The word came out as half squeak and half snort. Outraged at this madness, Nina started to push her chair back

And its my job to find out which world she comes from, and to get her back there before she kills anyone else.

Nina froze halfway to her feet. Kills …

Quietly, Nina, please. Id prefer not to be overheard.

She sagged back on to the chair, and ran her tongue nervously round her own lips.

Are you talking about … Charlie Johns? Her voice was under control now and she kept it to a whisper.

The Doctor nodded. Yes.

Youre saying Ruth murdered him?

No, Im not saying that. I dont think there was anything intentional about it. But I suspect his death was a side effect, as it were, of her presence in the village.

Nina had more wine; not a sip this time but a sizeable gulp. She hoped it would melt the ice dagger, but it didnt.

Let me get this straight, she said at last. Youre asking me to believe that Ruth is an alien, from another planet ET, and First Contact, and all that science fiction stuff?

Yes. Right. Right. And I suppose youre going to say that youre from another planet, too? The answer was immediate, emphatic, and as natural as if she had asked him the time of day. Yes.

Nina couldnt decide whether she wanted to scream, laugh or burst into tears. She was saved from making the decision by the return of the waiter with their meals. The food looked and smelled wonderful, and she didnt have a hope in hell of being able to eat it. The Doctor, though, twisted black pepper over his plate, then speared a potato and put it in his mouth.

Mm. Excellent. He sipped his wine, regarding her. Oh, dear. I rather think Ive upset you.

She could have said, yes, you have, because I dont believe a word youve told me and I think youre completely out of your tree. But deep inside her, all but buried under the confusion, a small voice was saying, hang on … Above all else the Doctor struck her as open, honest, genuine; perhaps more genuine than almost anyone she had ever met. The crazy thing was, her instinct was telling her to believe him. The even crazier thing was, she was convinced that her instinct was right OK, she said eventually, deciding on a new tack. Ruths an alien. Youre an alien. If youve both managed to get here, then your civilisations must be very advanced.

True. Try the duck; its splendid.

She ignored that, trying to hang on to the thread of her argument. Youre much more advanced than humans, because the furthest humans have ever gone is the Moon.

Your moon. Yes.

She eyed him suspiciously. Youre not trying to tell me youre from the Moon?

Of course not. No atmosphere; no life form could survive. Anyway, the Apollo missions would have discovered us.

Sure they would. So. Where was I?

The relative sophistication of different civilisations.

Yeah. Right. So … if youre so advanced, how come you need a human beings help to sort your problem out? And picking on me I mean, Im nothing special; Im not a scientist or a cosmologist or whatever Im just an ordinary person!

The Doctor smiledA wouldnt call you ordinary in the least. I doubt if you know how un-ordinary you are.

Nina glowed involuntarily at the compliment, then quickly and firmly crushed the reaction. You know what I mean! she said sharply.

Yes. Sorry. To answer your question, I need human help because the problem Ruth is causing has taken on a human aspect. And I didnt pick you at random. I know youve been watching Ruth for some time, so youve doubtless discovered a few things about her that I dont know. He paused. Then of course, theres the connection with your brother.

Steve? The ice dagger sharpened. How the hell do you know about that?

The Doctor smiled. Open eyes, open ears, and insatiable curiosity. It isnt exactly difficult to find out about people in a village like this.

That was true enough, and Nina relaxed fractionally, but her expression darkened.

Then if youve found out so much, you know Steves got the hots for her.

He certainly seems to have, doesnt he? Tell me, is that why youre so suspicious of her? A slim hand reached across the table and came to rest on hers; a sympathetic gesture, but she had the feeling that, perhaps, it conveyed something more. Its obvious, to me at least, that

you feel very protective towards Steve.

Stupidly, irrationally, Nina felt a prickling behind her eyes. I didnt like her from the start. All that stuff about being a journalist; it didnt ring true

But Steve couldnt see what you saw?

She nodded, and blinked rapidly. He still cant. Hes nuts about her. I I dont want him to get hurt … Suddenly she looked up and met his gaze with a confused compound of anger and desperation. And youre saying she might literally hurt him!

Her reaction confirmed the Doctors surmise. Steve was the key to her cooperation; she loved him fiercely, almost possessively, and because of it a part of her was afraid to dismiss what she was hearing, just in case it might possibly be true. But the thread of her belief was still fragile, reluctant, and one wrong move now could destroy it irrevocably. As they talked he had been inwardly debating how much to reveal to her. Now, he made his decision. But it would take care and patience.

He said aloud, As yet, Nina, I truly dont know. But its possible.

Nina stared down at her untouched meal. She didnt want it, or any more wine, or anything except the ability to think clearly, which was the one thing she could not do. The Doctor could see her inner turmoil, and he spoke gently.

Its a lot for you to absorb in one sitting, Nina. Do you want some time to think about it?

She nodded.

And perhaps youd like some more concrete proof, as well?

Nod again.

I can give you that. If youll trust me.

How?

By showing you the TARDIS, close to.

She shivered, and her mouth jerked briefly in an odd, cynical grin. Oh, thats the trick, is it? Get me inside the house, and then But she didnt know what then amounted to, or what she wanted it to amount to, so

she just shook her head and didnt finish the sentence.

I understand your caution.

I bet you do. She looked directly at him again. Why dont you talk to Steve instead of me?

Because Steve wouldnt listen. You said yourself, hes … got the hots for Ruth.

That sort of thing prejudices a man.

Reluctantly she acknowledged the logic of that. But if he thought she was just going to walk into that house with him …

A demon inside her said, Go on thats exactly what you want to do, and to her astonishment and dismay Nina heard herself reply, Well, maybe I could… God, what am I saying? Take it back, take it back! But it was too late to take it back, so instead, frantically, she tried to dissemble. That is I dont mean now, not at night!

The Doctor pushed his plate to one side. He had eaten half the meal and would have enjoyed the rest; to be seen enjoying it, though, would have sent Nina the wrong signals. I wouldnt dream of asking that of you, he told her kindly. We agree that you need some time to think, so Ill just say that you can find me at the cottage tomorrow morning, until, say, twelve oclock. He made as if to pat her hand, then thought better of it. Its up to you.

Right. There was an awkward pause, then she added, I think Ill go home now.

Of course.

Sorry I wasted the food. I just didnt …

It doesnt matter. Would you like me to walk you to your house?

Yes, said the demon. No, said Nina. Thank you. And for … She waved a hand at the table.

My pleasure. Perhaps another time we might both feel more like eating.

Yeah. Her jacket was draped over the back of the chair and she wouldnt let him help her on with it. Night, then.

Goodnight. I hope to see you tomorrow.

Yeah, well … She didnt want to finish that sentence either, and she hurried out of the bistro without looking back.

The door closed behind her, and as her vague figure flitted past the picture window the Doctor knew that she was peering in. He did not look up. He refilled his wine glass, then drew his plate back towards him and carefully piled the contents of Ninas on to it. Pity to see good food go to waste.

He began to eat heartily.

MORE ANSWERS

Lying in bed that night, Nina resolved that no power on earth was going to get her anywhere near that rented cottage tomorrow morning, or at any other time.

At twelve-thirty the next day, she walked in through the garden gate.

The timing, of course, was a deliberate compromise; later than the Doctors deadline, but not so late that he was sure to have given up on her completely. She wanted

needed to make the point that she would not automatically go along with what he wanted, that she was independent, careful, sensible …

The front door opened as she approached it, and the Doctor, wearing a loose-sleeved white shirt and very well-cut jeans, and with his hair attractively uncombed, said, Hello.

Hello. She stopped a wary two paces from him. You said youd only be here till twelve.

I did, but I seem to be running behind schedule this morning. He paused. Would you like to come in?

He stood back, making no attempt to corner her, and as she looked past him Nina saw that the cottages back door was also standing wide open. An escape route; his way, perhaps, of reassuring her that she had nothing to fear.

She took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold. Following, and leaving the front door open, the Doctor went into the small kitchen. Would you like some tea? I was just going to put the kettle on.

Suddenly, all Ninas muddled motivations crystallised into a single, sharply focused thought. She did not know what had goaded her to change her mind and keep this appointment curiosity, worry about Steve, the Doctors undeniable fascination (oh, dont be ridiculous!) but whatever it was didnt matter. Only one thing counted: whether he could prove his claim beyond all possible doubt. She firmly believed that he couldnt. But until she had checked the proof for herself, there would always be that tiny, subversive element of doubt.

She said, No thanks. Id rather just get this sorted.

Very well. He emerged from the kitchen, and nodded towards the closed door that, presumably, led to the sitting room. Please, go in.

Nina had a foolish fear that something shocking would happen when she touched the door handle. Nothing did, of course, and she turned the handle and opened the door.

The police telephone box stood where she had first seen it, in the middle of the room. Overnight she had worked out that it must be a cardboard fake, flat-packed and reassembled. It wasnt. It was uncompromisingly and undeniably solid, and it must have weighed a ton.

How … But there was no point in asking and she changed the question. All right.

Whats in it?

See for yourself. The Doctor took a very ordinary-looking key out of his jeans pocket, walked up to the box and unlocked the door. As it swung back he added, Ladies first.

No way. You first.

He made an acquiescent gesture, stepped inside, and disappeared.

Nina waited while seconds crawled by. She couldnt see into the box, but she could imagine the Doctor holding his breath behind the door, waiting to see which of them would give up first. So it came as a greater shock when she heard his voice call as from a great distance:

Arent you even going to look, Nina?

Her heart gave an enormous wallop and tried to turn over under her ribs. Why did he sound as if he were in a huge, echoing room? It must be a trick; he had sound equipment in there

Nina. If you dont look, youll never find out.

She couldnt argue. It had gone too far now; she had to know. Had to … She moved forward, leaned tremulously into the box

The cry she let out was a blend of shock, fright and sheer inability to believe. Then Nina burst into tears.

My dear girl! The Doctor was beside her, an arm around her shoulders, and she pressed her face against his shirt and cried as all

the tension and uncertainty that had been building up in her for days was suddenly and mercifully unleashed. She had a vague impression of being led to a comfortable armchair and helped to sit down, but when she tried to look up she had to hide her face again because the whole thing was so impossible. She had stepped into a space which couldnt by any stretch of the imagination be more than a metre square, and found herself in a vast, rambling room like a set from a Victorian costume drama, with wood panelling and paintings, and sofas and and

The Doctor said soothingly, A cup of tea would help. It really would.

Y… Nina hiccoughed, gulped. Y-yes … I th-think it might.

All right. Now she knew for certain. The Doctor wasnt mad, because he had proved to her, beyond the shadow of doubt she had been looking for, that everything he had told her in the bistro last night was true. If anyone was mad, it could only be herself. In which case, all this was a hallucination. In which case none of it mattered a damn. So she might as well go along with it from here on.

Nina finished her second helping of tea and put the delicate porcelain cup back on its saucer. She was very glad she had managed not to break it; it looked expensive.

Then she pushed nervous fingers through her hair and for the first time really took in the interior of the TARDIS.

Time And Relative Dimensions In Space. The Doctor had explained it to her, but she knew she would never fully grasp it unless she spent the next twenty years studying quantum physics, and even then … Suffice it to say that the outside and the inside of the TARDIS occupied a completely different set of dimensions, that followed completely different physical laws. Or something. The end result was, effectively, a cross between a space ship and a time machine. And it came from a planet called Gallifrey, which was located oh, never mind where it was; the distances were too mind-boggling. The Doctor came from Gallifrey too, and he was a Time Lord. Which meant he could sort of control time. Or if not actually control it, at least move through it, in any direction, so that …

Confusion filled Ninas mind again like a thick sea-fog, and she gave up trying to understand the details. Keep it simple, she thought. Facts. They were what mattered.

The Doctor was an alien from outer space, and he had come here

because his instruments had detected an anomaly in the … what was it? … space-time continuum, that was right. A kind of blip, that told him something was awry. He had traced it to Earth, pinpointed it to this village, and had come to investigate. His readings told him that there was something here that should not exist on Earth. And this something was a substance that caused a fundamental, and potentially dangerous, clash. That something was Ruth. And Steve thought Ruth was human, and was dating her.

She heard a footstep and looked up to see the Doctor standing beside her. Feeling better? he asked.

Mm. Nina nodded. Yes. Thank you. Nice tea. She giggled. Ive worked it out. This thing, the TARDIS. I know why it looks like a police phone box. Youre a kind of intergalactic policeman, and its your joke.

The Doctor laughed too, then sat down astride an ornate Baroque chair. Do you know,

he said, folding his arms on the chairs gilded back, you impress me enormously.

I do? She blinked, taken aback.

Oh, yes. Not many people, even in the twenty-first century, are prepared to accept the truth about me, even when I present them with incontrovertible evidence. You, though, have not only accepted, but even have a sense of humour about it. Then his look sobered Youve saved me an enormous headache, Nina. And a great deal of time.

She giggled again and waved at the room. Time doesnt matter to you, though, does it? If I waste any, you can just wind it back!

Well … it isnt quite that simple. And it would be helpful if we didnt waste more than we have to. We need to talk about Ruth. He hesitated. Would you rather go back into the cottage? The TARDIS can be daunting

No. Nina struggled into a more upright position from the armchairs delicious depths. I rather like it in here. Now Im getting used to it. She sounded surprised, and he grinned, his blue eyes twinkling with pleasure. Strange, thought Nina, she could have sworn they were green before.

Good! To Ruth, then. There are three things I would very much like to know: one, which world she comes from; two, how she got here; and three, why she came. Answering number one would probably also answer number two, but three is more of a conundrum.

Her intentions could be wholly innocent. On the other hand

Nina interrupted. How can they be innocent, if she killed Charlie?

I dont know that she had anything to do with his death. As I said last night, its only a surmise, and until I can find out more about her I cant be sure.

With an effort Nina bit back her impatience. OK, she said. So how do we find out where shes from? We cant exactly walk straight up to her and ask!

Quite. The Doctor picked up his own teacup, saw that it was empty and put it down again. His eyes narrowed. Id like to find out where shes based. She must have brought some survival equipment from her own world, and if I could trace that

Cant you? Nina was surprised. With the gadgets you must have, Id have thought itd be easy.

Oh, theoretically, it is. Ive certainly got enough “gadgets” to detect a signature from any off-planet material. But Ive tried every method I can think of, and found nothing at all. Either somethings blocking the signals, or her technology is unknown even to me. He looked up, his eyes intent. You tried to follow her a few days ago, didnt you?

So he had seen them … Nina made a sound midway between a sigh and a snort. Yeah, well, that was a pretty useless exercise. She described Ruths abrupt and baffling disappearance as they had approached the holiday chalets, finishing, I dont know how she did it. Theres nothing else up there except the coast path, so unless she can make herself invisible? She lifted querying eyebrows.

Possible, the Doctor said, but unlikely. Were talking technology, not magic, and invisibility involves some highly complicated physical laws.

I could ask around the village, see if shes renting something, Nina suggested. Or Steve might know.

I doubt that he does. Anyway, I dont want to involve him; as I said

before, hes too biased. No, my guess is that she isnt renting, because it would be too risky.

Shes hiding somewhere in the area.

I could try following her again.

You could, yes, but if she gave you the slip once shes likely to do it a second time. For the moment, I think we should concentrate on other aspects. The Doctor stood up and paced across the floor, stopping by a large console at the centre of the room. It looked like something out of a Jules Verne story; as the Doctors fingers moved over it, he said, Hmm … and made a minor adjustment to something that she couldnt see. Then he turned to her again.

Have you wondered, he asked, why Ruth chose to pose as a journalist? No, said Nina, and felt foolish for not having thought of it. But it is weird, isnt it? Like drawing attention to herself.

When you would imagine thats the last thing she wanted to do. My point exactly. So what did she want to find out, that could only be found by that method?

Nina frowned. She asked me about the last lifeboat shout, when they found that body in the sea. She wanted to talk to Steve about it.

And did she?

It was how they first met. But I dont know what she asked him. And Id be the last person hed ever tell, she added ruefully.

Hmm … the Doctor said again. Links … He did something else to the console, and a faint, humming vibration began, faded, stopped. The unfortunate young man who drowned. Do you know if hes been identified yet?

I dont think so. Though there was something weird about him; rumours that he wasnt normal, and She stopped and stared at the Doctor in consternation as the penny dropped.

The Doctor smiled thinly. I think, Nina, that as the saying goes youve got it in one.

He was an alien, too! Oh my God, I never thought; it didnt click!

I didnt arrive here in time to see the body, mores the pity. But the

nature of the rumours genetic modification, the whole Frankenstein thing it fits, doesnt it?

It certainly did. So there were two of them, and one got killed, and now Ruths trying to But hold on; what is she trying to do? If she wants his body back, she should be hanging around at the mortuary, not here.

Quite. Therefore we can make an educated guess that that isnt what she wants. And whatever she does want, she thinks your brother can help her.

I cant work that out at all, said Nina. OK, he was in charge of the lifeboat crew, but all they did was bring the body back. They dont know anything else about She stopped. Oh, shit.

The Doctor looked at her in surprise. Pardon?

Nina, though, wasnt thinking about her language. Something had abruptly and frighteningly slotted into place in her mind. Steves blistered hands She whispered, He must have touched him.

What? The Doctor sounded baffled. What do you mean, Nina? Who must have touched whom?

She told him about Steves symptoms, worry growing like a canker with every moment.

Its possible, isnt it? she finished. If hes an alien Steve must have touched him when they got him out of the water! And now hes seeing Ruth, and the blisters have come back, and hes getting ill

Wait, wait, wait! The Doctor held up both hands, palms out. Calm down, Nina. He came back from the console and dropped to a crouch beside her, taking hold of one of her hands and squeezing it until some of her tension ebbed. Lets take this step by step. Steves hands became blistered, yes? Did any of the other crew suffer the same thing?

She frowned. No-o … I dont think so, anyway. But Charlie Johns

The

fisherman who died?

Yes. It happened to him.

Was he in the lifeboat crew?

She laughed, though there was a shaky edge to her laughter. No! Hes he was much too old. This was later, after the … No, hang on; Im getting this all wrong. She shook her head as if to clear a muddle, then made an exasperated noise. Sorry. Steve didnt get the blisters after they brought the body in. It was at the same time as Charlie. After the dive.

Dive? What dive?

Oh, it was a few days later, she said. One of Charlies crab-pot lines got snarled on the sea-bed. Steve and a couple of others helped him free it; there was some junk down there, wreckage that the currents must have brought in, and

Nina. The Doctors tone stopped her in her tracks, and his expression became taut suddenly, his eyes lighting unnervingly. Tell me about the wreckage. What did they find?

She shrugged. Junk, like I said. Probably stuff off a container ship, or something.

They didnt bring any of it to the surface, did they? Yeah, they did, actually.

Just a scrap, though; it couldnt tell you

anything.

What happened to it?

The light in his eyes had intensified and Ninas heart began to thump. Why? she asked.

Because it might be the most important clue so far! Tell me, Nina, what happened to that piece?

Steve gave it to Charlie, and Charlie made it into a pendant. He was good at making jewellery; he used to Then she stopped, as the connection, the howlingly obvious connection that she hadnt thought of until now, hit her. Oh, my God … she said.

When Charlie died, his family gave the pendant to Steve!

The Doctor snapped his fingers and jack-knifed to his feet so fast that she visibly jumped. Has he still got it?

Yes. He wears it, like a sort of keepsake. Doctor, is that it? Is that what killed Charlie and whats making Steve ill?

The Doctor was heading for the door of the TARDIS, and flung his reply over his shoulder at her. I dont know, he said, but if I were a betting man, Id put my shirt on it! Come on, Nina, come on!

Where? What are we going to do?

Not we, he said, you. He flung the door open, revealing the incongruity of the cottage room beyond. I dont care how you do it. But youve got to get me that pendant and fast!

BURGLARY

No, hes at work. Barry, Steves flatmate, looked at Nina curiously, and she belatedly realised that she had made a tactical mistake. Of course she knew Steve was working, and Barry knew she knew. Blunder; now his suspicions would be aroused.

Still, she had to try.

Well look, she said, giving him what she hoped was an innocent smile, I only wanted to pop into his room and pick up something I left here the other day.

Barry didnt trust her, and his expression showed it. Fine, he said. Tell me what it is, and Ill get it for you.

I, er, cant, really. Its personal. A girl thing, you know.

And you left it in Steves room. Disbelief was palpable.

Yeah. Itll only take a minute, honestly. She paused. Please?

For all his doubts he couldnt really refuse and, reluctantly, he stepped back and stopped blocking the doorway. All right but make it quick. Im supposed to be at work, too; I only called in on my way from one place to another.

Nina shot past him into the flat. As she opened Steves bedroom door she found time to be grateful that she and her brother werent alike. Her room was a permanent tip

Woolworths after the Bomb as her father grumblingly called it but Steves was neat, tidy; a place for everything, and everything in its place. The pendant would be either on top of his chest of drawers, or inside one of the drawers. Right. Nothing on the top, so

She started to open the top drawer and Barry said, Its not going to be in there, is it?

Nina started, and swung round to see him standing on the threshold, arms folded.

Damn! She hadnt expected him to follow her.

It might be, she said defensively. Steve might have put it away.

No, he wouldnt. Barry sighed with exasperation. OK, Nina; game over. I dont know what youre up to, but if youre trying to get your hands on something of Steves, youre just going to have to ask him. Barry No, Barry repeated firmly. Youre not doing it, and thats final. Now, out, please. But

Out. I havent got time to mess around. Come back when Steves home, and have the guts to be honest. Go on. Im busy.

Nina had no choice. She made one more attempt to reason with Barry, as she saw it, but he wasnt having any, and the front door of the flat shut firmly in her face.

A rush of frustration and anger welled up in her. Why were people so dense? If Barry only knew, if he realised But he didnt realise, and neither did Steve, and even if they did they wouldnt believe her.

She spun on her heel and stamped away so hard that the pavement hurt her feet. Down the side lane, into the high street and towards the beach road she was unconsciously heading back to the Doctors cottage to report her failure when abruptly the anger crystallised into a new determination. This was too important for failure to be an option. She was doing it for Steve. (And for the Doctor, too.) Steves health was at stake. Maybe his life was at stake! And what would the Doctor think of her, it? she screwed up? (Not that that was important, of course it wasnt.

It didnt matter what he thought of her; just because he was attractive and mysterious and not remotely like anyone else shed ever met in her life …) Ohhhhw! It came out as a growl, and she stopped walking and glared into the middle distance. If Barry was going to act like a guard dog, shed just have to use a bit of subtlety. All right breaking and entering wasnt exactly subtle, but there was a saying, wasnt there: needs must when the devil drives. Barry would be going back to his work as a delivery driver in a few minutes. And Nina knew just how to open that loose catch on the flats kitchen window.

She found the pendant in the bottom drawer of Steves chest. The sense of relief was enormous; she had begun to fear that it wasnt in the room, that he was wearing it and never took it off, which would have made things extremely complicated. But here it was, complete with copper setting and loop of chain.

She had a moments frisson as she reached to pick it up, wondering if it were safe to touch it with her bare hands. But a few seconds surely

couldnt hurt slipping it into her shoulder-bag, she haphazardly shoved the rest of the drawers contents back into place, shut the drawer and got out and away as quickly as she could.

The Doctor was waiting at the cottage, and as he opened the door to her she said triumphantly, Got it!

Wonderful! To her surprise and delight he hugged her and gave her a smacking kiss

only on the forehead, but it was a kiss nonetheless. Ill get working on it right away!

What are you going to do? she asked.

Some experiments that I hope will tell me where this and thus Ruth comes from. He smiled. You wouldnt understand them, and youd find them very boring, so theres no point in your staying. Come back later say, seven-thirty?

Oh. Nina felt herself deflating; she did not want to go, and this casual dismissal pricked the bubble of her fancies. All right, she said. I suppose so.

The Doctor showed no sign that he had noticed her reluctance, or the grudging tone in which she spoke. He was already heading towards the sitting room and the TARDIS, and seemed to expect her to let herself out. Nina swallowed the disappointment as best she could, and trailed disconsolately from the house.

Nina was supposed to do at least some studying at home today, but in her keyed-up state that was out of the question. She drooped around the house until her mother said tartly that if she wasnt going to do school work shed better do something useful like clean her room, unless she thought the fairies were going to do it for her. That brought a sharp response from Nina, but before it could turn into yet another row she grabbed her coat and stamped out, saying she would be back When I feel like it!

It was only six oclock; far too early to go to the Doctors cottage. Nonetheless Nina walked there and hung around outside the gate for a while, hoping that the Doctor might emerge. He didnt. There were no lights in the house, and the curtains were closed again; this time without any chinks. At last, frustrated, Nina gave up and went to the beach.

Yesterdays rain was gone but the wind was blowing a hooley as the lifeboat crew termed it, and the sea was a mass of enormous waves, piling in one after another. The lifeguards had packed up for the evening, leaving their red flag flying as a warning that the tide was dangerous, but a few local surfers, who knew the conditions, were braving it. Nina sat on the quay wall near the beached fishing boats and watched for a while, half wishing she had brought her own board. But even the strongest and most experienced surfers were giving up now and hauling themselves shorewards, breathless and bruised from being hurled around by the seas massive ferocity. Most of them nodded hello as they passed, but no one wanted to stop and talk. By seven, Nina was the only person left on the beach. And she was becoming very, very impatient.

Steve had just turned the shower off when the flat phone rang. He heard Barry shout, Ill get it! and listened idly as he wrapped one towel round his waist and started to dry his hair with another.

Its for you! Barry shouted.

Havent got time now Ill call back! Apart from the tiredness that he didnt seem able to shake off, Steve was feeling on top of the world. He hadnt seen Ruth for nearly a week, but tonight they were meeting up for a meal. He had promised himself that he would take her somewhere out of the village. Somewhere where they could be alone together without curious friends butting in. Somewhere atmospheric, romantic

Barrys head appeared round the bathroom door and he said, Youd better take it, mate. Its Ruth.

As he picked up the receiver Steve knew what she was going to say, and he was right.

He put the phone down after a couple of minutes, and his face showed everything.

She hasnt cried off ? Barry said.

Steve nodded glumly. She cant make it.

Barry shook his head. I tell you, mate, youre on a loser with that one. Shes messing you around. Probably married with two kids, it? you did but know. Whats her excuse work again?

Yeah. It always was work, Steve reflected. Fair enough; Ruth was a

journalist, and journalists sometimes had to drop everything and go if a news story came up. As a lifeboat crewman, used to emergencies, he of all people understood that. But it happened so often.

If you had a pint for every date shes broken so far, Barry observed, you could get very, very drunk.

I know, I know. You dont need to rub it in! Then defensively he added, I think it must be some major story shes covering. Shes probably working all hours on it; she sounded pretty exhausted. You know; voice shaky, that sort of thing.

What, like she was trying not to laugh at you for being so gullible? Barry retorted cynically. Stevie, boy, you are a pillock!

Steve went into his bedroom without answering. In the back of his mind, though, he wondered uncomfortably if Barry was right, and Ruth did have another life in which he played no part. She still wouldnt give him her phone number he hadnt even been able to find out where she worked, for every time he asked, she changed the subject.

Trouble was, he was keen on her, and the fact that she was playing hard to get probably made him even keener. Ah, well. She had promised to see him on Friday. Just have to hope that work didnt intervene again.

As he started to get dressed Barry called through the half-open door. Come for a couple at the Huers, yeah? Better than sitting in moping.

Steve didnt really feel like it, but… OK. I suppose so. Give me five minutes, and Ill be with you. There was the sound of a drawer being opened, then: What the hell?

What the hell what?

How did this drawer get in such a mess? Have you been rummaging in here?

Course I havent! Barry said indignantly.

Well, I wouldnt have left it like this! And wheres my pendant? The one Charlie made?

What, from the bit of wreckage? Havent seen it, mate.

It was in this drawer, I know it was … what the hells going on?

A connection clicked in Barrys memory and he said, Uh-oh. Nina …

Nina? Steves face appeared round the door. Whats she got to do with it?

Barry told him about Ninas earlier visit and her claim to have left something in his room. I chucked her out, he said. Didnt believe a word she was saying; you know how obvious it is when shes trying one of her stunts? But I went back to work soon afterwards. You dont think

The window catch. Grim-faced, Steve went to look. As he had suspected, the catch

which he and Barry always fastened when they were out was unclipped.

She must have forgotten to fix it after her when she climbed in, Steve said. There was suppressed fury in his voice, and a wave of anger building up in him. Nosy, thieving little He took a deep breath.

What on earth would she want the pendant for? Barry asked.

God knows. Just fancied borrowing it, probably, to show off to someone. But shes Nina, so of course she doesnt have to ask. Steve shoved his feet into his trainers and grabbed a sweatshirt. Right. Ill see you down the Huers later. He strode towards the door. First, Im going to sort my sister out!

Nina had intended to be deliberately late for her meeting with the Doctor, to make the point that she had her own life to lead and wasnt always going to be available when it suited him. But cold and boredom were adding themselves to her impatience, and at seven-fifteen all three feelings combined to get the better of her. So shed be early. Tough. If he wasnt ready for her, he would just have to lump it.

She started to get to her feet, turning as she did so and froze as she saw Ruth heading towards her down the beach road. Ruth was walking slowly and a little unsteadily; every few paces she paused for a second or two, and once she put a hand up to her face and swayed as though she was about to faint. She might have been drunk, but Nina didnt think she was. Something else was wrong. Ruth was ill.

Comparisons with Steves mysterious ailments leaped into Ninas mind,

and with them an urgent need to find out what Ruth was doing down here in such a state. Thinking fast, she decided that her best bet would be to jump down on to the quay and hide among the fishing boats, from where she could see what her quarry was up to.

Crouching, she spidered towards the edge of the wall and Ruth stopped again. Her head came up sharply, like a wild animal alert for danger … then she turned and ran, a peculiar, shambling run, back the way she had come.

Nina swore under her breath. She had thought she could move without being seen, but clearly she was wrong and equally clearly Ruth wanted to avoid a meeting. She was hurrying, stumbling as though her legs could hardly support her and it struck Nina suddenly that, if she followed her again, this time Ruth wouldnt be able to outstrip her and get away. The Doctor could wait. This was the perfect chance.

She scrambled up and started after Ruth. As before she was careful to keep her just in sight, and wasnt in the least surprised when, again, she turned on to the cliff path. On you go, Ruth, sweetie, Nina thought. Ill be right behind you!

Ruth did not look back. It was as if, having seen Nina at the beach, she had either assumed that she would not have the nerve to follow her again, or had completely forgotten about her. Watching her lurching, erratic progress, Nina suspected the latter. Ruth was definitely unwell, and the more she thought about it the more convinced Nina became that there was a link between her state and Steves illness.

They were nearing the holiday chalets and she was working on the idea of confronting Ruth and capitalising on her weakness to force a few answers out of her, when a voice from below shouted her name. Nina started, looked back and saw the Doctor waving at her from the foot of the path.

Nina! Where are you going?

She flapped her hands in a frantic gesture intended to convey, Shut up! but he took no notice. Come down here, quickly!

Nina flapped at him again, turned to look ahead

Ruth had disappeared.

She said something obscene through clenched teeth and was half inclined to ignore the Doctor and race away up the cliff path. But Ruth was gone and there was something in the Doctors voice.

Nina ran back down the path towards him.

TALISMAN

Im sorry, Im sorry! The Doctor cut across Ninas breathless attempt to berate him. I know it was an opportunity, and I know I spoiled it! But believe me, Nina, what Ive discovered is more important! Besides, he glanced speculatively up at the path where Ruth had vanished, I dont believe shell be venturing far from now on. I dont believe shes able to.

Ninas annoyance slid sideways and out of her head at this. You mean, she really is ill?

Very. In fact, if something isnt done about it soon, terminally. He grasped her hand. Come on! Back to the cottage, and Ill tell you what Ive discovered.

Nina went with him, trying not to notice how enjoyable it was to be holding hands. In the cottage sitting room the Doctor unlocked the TARDIS, led her straight in and shut the door behind them.

Right, he said. Ive found out where Ruth is from, and with reasonable certainty how she got here. You have? Ninas voice came out as a squeak in her excitement.

All from that little bit of scrap metal?

Which is anything but scrap metal, as a matter of interest. But well come to that later. He indicated the same comfortable armchair that she had occupied earlier.

Sit down. And tell me have you ever come across the term, tourists?

So now they knew why Ruth and her dead friend had come to Earth. The explanation was crazier than anything Ninas wildest imagination could have invented and yet, in a way, it was ludicrously simple. The people of Ruths world were highly technologically advanced the Doctor had visited on a number of occasions, and had seen for himself and had long ago abandoned literal space travel in favour of a convenient, simple (Simple? Nina had squeaked) system of spatial gateways, by which they could transport themselves to other planets, in their own galaxy and even further afield.

Fortunately for the worlds they visit, the Doctor had said, Ruths people have developed a civilised philosophy as well as an advanced technology. All too many races see technical advancement as an open

invitation to conquest. I remember the time I was but I mustnt sidetrack. As I was saying, Ruths people are peaceable, thankfully, and they use their abilities to reach other worlds for one purpose alone. He had smiled then with dry amusement. Tourism.

The aliens of Ruths world had a great deal of leisure time, the Doctor had explained, and one of their most popular recreations was using the gateways administered by their equivalent of travel agencies, to explore other worlds. Strict rules were imposed on their visits: they must not, under any circumstances, betray their origins or influence the visited world in any way, and for that reason they were not permitted to take any of their technology with them, other than the basic necessities for life support and communication. However, the Doctor guessed that Ruth and her friend had broken the rules.

Ive analysed the molecular structure of the cylinder your brother brought up from the sea-bed. It certainly didnt originate on Earth, Nina. Its from Ruths world.

Water, the Doctor had explained, was completely inimical to their species, and immersion in the sea must have finished him agonisingly in minutes.

That explains something, said Nina, recalling. For all the time shes spent around the beach, Ruth never goes near the water. Had you noticed?

I hadnt, the Doctor admitted. But now you mention it … And on rainy days, she doesnt show up at all. Of course. He smiled. Youd make an excellent detective!

But why does she still keep going to the beach? Nina asked. She must know her friends dead. Unless the body in the sea wasnt him?

Oh, it was him the rumours are proof enough of that. And the timings right, too.

The anomaly I detected happened about three days before the poor chap was found.

No, no, Nina demurred. It cant have been then. Hed been in the sea for ages; one of the crew told me. She swallowed back a queasy feeling as she recalled the details that Martin had solemnly and gloomily described. He was pretty decomposed.

He would have been, said the Doctor. In our atmosphere and

especially in water

his remains would decay much more quickly than a humans. But to return to your question: why does she keep going to the beach? My guess is that shes afraid something might wash up there. If it did, she would be in very serious trouble. Its bad enough that her friend died. But as I said, the rate of decay for one of her species will be rapid; in fact I wouldnt mind wagering that there isnt much left of him by now. So the organic evidence of their visit will be gone before your pathologists can come anywhere near to solving the mystery. However, to go home and confess that she has left a piece of their technology to be found by a primitive people sorry, but by their standards thats what humans are is probably more than she has the courage to face. He smiled sadly. Shes very young. Just like you.

Thanks! Nina bridled. You make me sound about six years old!

I didnt mean it in that way. But you are young. So you probably understand far better than I do how hard it is for Ruth to face up to what shes done. Shes frightened, Nina frightened, and alone among strangers.

Nina scowled. Whose faults that? She got herself into this; if she suffers for it, shes only got herself to blame. All I care about is making sure that she cant screw up my brother any more than shes already done.

The Doctor didnt answer, but Nina felt the change in the atmosphere between them.

She raised her eyes quickly, warily, and saw him looking back at her with a steady, assessing gaze in which was a hint of sadness. Then he said quietly, Im surprised to hear you say that. And disappointed.

Ninas waspish bravado wavered. I only meant she began.

I know what you meant. But I would have thought that you, of all people, would have some sympathy for Ruth. Dont you break rules? Arent you rebellious? Or is all that just a pretence?

His words hit their mark with painful accuracy, and the bravado collapsed altogether as a hot flood of shame washed over Nina. Suddenly she felt about as small and stupid as a caterpillar; a tear dropped from her cheek to the floor, then a second, and she could have kicked herself for being unable to control them.

Im sorry. Her voice was tight, barely more than a whisper. I didnt mean it …

Im just so worried about Steve.

Steves safe, now that hes no longer in contact with the pendant, the Doctor told her more gently. But Ruth isnt. Shes in real danger. And we should try to do something about that before its too late.

T-too late?

Yes. The rumours that started about her companion being genetically modified were true. When Ruths people visit other planets, they have genetic adjustments made, to change their outward appearance and to enable them to cope with alien conditions more easily. But the adjustments are only temporary; natural cell renewal gradually lessens their effect and contact with water just speeds up the process. Ruth is reverting back to her true state. And in her true state she cant survive on Earth.

Shes already becoming ill. If she stays here much longer, then the changes will go too far and, like a fish out of water, shell die.

Ninas hostility towards Ruth made a last assault protest, saying, So what? Who cares? But the Doctors rebuke, though mild compared to what it could have been, had gone sharply home. She had already diminished herself in his eyes. She desperately didnt want him to despise her any further.

Hoping that her feelings had not betrayed themselves too clearly on her face, she blinked several times, then tried to keep her voice casual. She Ruth looked bad when I saw her earlier. She glanced sidelong at the Doctor from behind the curtain of her hair. If shes ill, then OK, wed better try and do something. But what?

Find her, for a start, the Doctor replied. And that wont be easy. You said she went the same way as before, up the cliff path?

Yeah. But it doesnt lead anywhere, except to the holiday chalets.

Nonetheless, I think I should take a look. He got to his feet, moved to the door of the TARDIS and opened it, revealing the disorientating contrast of the small cottage sitting room beyond. Then he paused, looking back at Nina. Will you come with me?

But what about Steve? Nina protested. Weve got to warn him!

The Doctor shook his head. We cant warn him unless we tell him the truth, Nina, and you know perfectly well that he wouldnt believe a word. Besides, now that he isnt in contact with the pendant, it cant do him any more damage. Ruths the one who needs us now. Help me to help her.

She started to rise, thought of Steve again, hesitated.

Please? the Doctor said gently. I really do need you.

Doubt gave way to another emotion entirely, and Nina went with him.

TROUBLE

The sun was near to setting, and a break in the clouds let through the bars of slanting

light that made the south-western sea look like a sheet of aluminium. The wind still gusted strongly, whipping Ninas hair stingingly across her face and snatching her breath away as she and the Doctor started up the cliff path. She wasnt good at altitudes, and although the cliffs hereabouts werent as high as many in Cornwall

Hells Mouth further down the coast was a dizzying example they were still big enough to give her a nervous pang when she dared to glance over the edge. The fishing boats on the quay looked like toys, and even the breakers seemed nothing. Her stomach gave a queasy lurch and she looked away.

The Doctor slowed as they neared the holiday chalets, studying them alertly. They were all occupied; lights shone from windows and the muffled blare of a television clashed with the softer, natural sounds of sea and wind.

No cars, he said. They park them higher up, Nina told him. Theres a space thats accessible from the road.

Right. Well, this doesnt look like a likely hiding place for Ruth, but just to be sure … He took a black and silver device about the size and shape of a fountain pen from his pocket, and began to pan it slowly across the area around the chalets.

Nina half expected something weird to happen, but nothing did, and after a few seconds she said, Whats that?

A scanner, of a sort. Tells me whether theres anything untoward around living entities, anomalous technologies, things like that.

And is there?

Nothing stranger than a TV with bad reception. He smiled, but only briefly. Onward and upward!

They left the chalets behind and the path turned more steeply upwards, following the line of the cliff edge. A short flight of steps cut roughly into the turf brought them to the highest point; as they

reached the top the wind suddenly and violently increased, blasting straight in off the Atlantic and making Nina stagger and clutch at the Doctors arm to steady herself. Someone who obviously knew all about Cornish weather had built a length of metre-high stone wall here, between the path and the drop to the sea, and Nina hunkered down in the lee of it, thankful for the shelter.

Where does the path lead from here on? the Doctor asked, raising his voice to be heard above the wind. On round the cliffs, she called back. But theres nothing except

heather and gorse until you get to the next beach.

How fars that?

She shrugged. Two miles. Maybe three.

Any dry hiding places?

No. Not a thing.

All right. The Doctor turned and looked landward, at a nearby area of bare, thin and sandy soil, strewn with stones. Behind it, where the cliff rose in a bluff, a narrow, rectangular and clearly man-made fissure gaped. Whats that? he asked, pointing at it.

An entrance to one of the old mine workings, Nina told him. The areas riddled with them.

Can one go in?

Yes, but not very far. A short way down the tunnel theres usually a drop straight down into a shaft or an adit thats an air outlet.

Mmm … The Doctor walked towards the bluff, then took out the black and silver device again and pointed it at the fissure. A few seconds passed, then he made an adjustment with his thumb, pointed the device again, waited.

Anything? Nina asked.

Not a sign. He sighed. A great pity. It seems like such an obvious location: almost the only one possible, in fact. But this device is accurate, and extremely powerful. If Ruth or her spatial gate were in there, it would pick them up.

Nina peered into the fissure, but with the sun now down behind the

cliffs the entrance was a solid, dark blank. Like I said, theres probably a shaft not far in, and its impassable. She turned away from the fissure and hugged herself. The lights going. Itll be dark soon, and theres no point hanging around here until we cant see our way back.

She could see the Doctor was reluctant, but he gave in. The sun was below the horizon now and the gathering dusk was draining the world of colour and blurring the dividing line between sea and sky. The mineshaft entrance had faded into the general brooding dark of the bluff, and the path was pale and vague. Nina, who knew it better, went ahead then as the track turned for the downward drop to the holiday chalets, a dark figure loomed suddenly in front of her. She gave an involuntary scream and the scream choked off as she saw who it was.

Steve! Shock took most of her breath away and she gasped for more. God almighty, you scared the hell out of me! What the hell are you doing up here?

In the twilight Steves face looked as grim as granite. I might well ask you the same question! he snapped, then his gaze fixed antagonistically on the Doctor a pace behind Nina. Or maybe I should ask him!

Hes a friend of mine, Nina said aggressively. Not that its any business of yours! Considering how old you are, I think its very much my business! Do Mum and Dad know where you are or who youre with? Nina opened her mouth to fire back at him, but before she could, the Doctor spoke. Steve. Im pleased to meet you. He held out a hand, but Steve only

glared at it and didnt attempt to shake.

Who are you? he demanded.

Hes the Doctor, Nina cut in. And if you had any sense at all, youd listen to what he Nina, I dont think this is the right moment, the Doctor said hastily. He addressed Steve again. I understand your concern for your sister, Steve, but I assure you, theres nothing to worry about.

Oh, isnt there? Make a habit of cradle-snatching, do you? Well, you might as well know right now; whatever shes told you, Nina is seventeen years old, which in my book makes her just a bit too young for someone of your age!

He knows how old I am! Nina said furiously. If youve got a filthy mind, thats your problem, not mine! Anyway, youre a fine one to talk, arent you? Whats the matter Ruth stood you up again?

Steves mouth tightened into a ferocious line. Oh, yeah, he said in a dangerous tone. That reminds me. Where is it?

Wheres what, for Christs sake? What are you on about now?

My pendant. The one Charlie made. You took it from my room, didnt you?

Even in the dusk he saw the guilty start that Nina wasnt quick enough or cunning enough to suppress, and his expression turned thunderous. You thieving little bitch whats the matter with you? Breaking into my flat, taking my things youve got problems, Nina big problems! Where is it?

Near tears, Nina looked desperately at the Doctor. The Doctor sighed, and a hand went to his pocket. I presume you mean this? he said resignedly.

What the … why have you got it? Showing off, was she? Thought handing out presents made her look flash?

Dont be so stupid, Steve! Nina shouted. I gave it to him because

I dont give a toss why you did anything; Im not interested! Steve squared up to the Doctor and held out a demanding hand. The pendant happens to be my property, so Ill thank you to give it back, right now.

Nina saw the Doctor hesitate, and there was only one interpretation she could put on that. He was going to give Steve the pendant. And Steve was going to put it round his neck, and its alien nature would start to work on him again, infecting him, taking him down the same lethal road that Charlie Johns had taken. She couldnt let that happen. She wouldnt let it happen.

She yelled, No! and before either man could react she snatched the pendant, pushed past the Doctor and ran back up the path.

Nina! Steve called. Nina, come back here! The Doctor was calling her too; she heard his voice mingling with Steves as he cried urgently, Nina, dont! But she ignored them both and ran on. As she neared the top of the cliff she heard pounding footsteps coming up fast behind

her. Reaching the low wall she swung round like a cornered animal, holding the pendant high.

Youre not having it back! she screamed at Steve. Youre not!

Her arm swung back, and she threw the pendant as far as she could out to sea.

She didnt see the arc of its fall, and the sounds of surf and wind eclipsed the noise of it hitting the water. But she knew it was gone beyond recall, and that was all that mattered. She didnt care what Steve did to her now. The pendant was gone, and it couldnt harm him any more.

Steve stared for what seemed to her like a very long time. Then he said through clenched teeth, I think youre seriously out of your mind.

Im not! she told him miserably. You dont understand any of it, Steve! If you did She stopped then as another shape emerged from the gloom. Doctor! Tell him, please! Make him understand!

The Doctor stopped, staring at her, and his eyes seemed to burn. Oh, Nina, he said.

You dont know what youve done.

I do! she shouted. Tell him, Doctor!

Steve shook his head, making a savage gesture that stopped anything the Doctor might have said in reply. Im not going to listen! Im taking you home, Nina.

Steve

I said, Im taking you home! He grabbed her arm, fingers digging painfully into the soft flesh around her biceps. He turned to the Doctor. And if you think youre going to argue with me

Im not, the Doctor said quietly. If Nina had been in any state of mind to notice, she would have seen that he looked defeated and deeply worried. Under the circumstances, it seems the only sensible course. She shouldnt have done what she did. You see, there was something I didnt have time to tell her. Maybe if I try to explain

I dont think so, thank you very much! Whoever you are, I suggest that you keep out of my way from now on and dont come sniffing round

my sister again! Come on, Nina. Were going!

Nina protested tearfully but Steve wasnt listening, and when she tried to appeal to the Doctor, she was appalled to see him turn away. She felt utterly betrayed but as Steve started to march her homewards, the Doctor looked briefly back. His eyes met hers; one hand made a quick, warning gesture out of Steves line of sight, and with a fractional movement he shook his head. The message was clear. It said: Ill see you soon.

DISCOVERIES

Well, shed screwed up royally, and that was all there was to it. Nina lay in bed with the light out, masochistically re-living the humiliation of the walk home with Steve. The trouble was, there had been a point when the situation could have been saved. Not at first, of course; that had been a shouting, sniping disaster as they hurled insults and accusations at each other until, half way up the hill, she had started crying again. To begin with Steve had ignored her, but after a while his better nature had struggled to the surface and he told her brusquely to stop trying to get round me like that and, if she really was so upset about something, tell him straight out what it was. To Nina it had seemed like a ray of hope, so, ignoring the Doctors warning, she had done just that. And ruined everything.

Aliens? Steve had stopped dead in the middle of the road and his voice rose as he looked at her in sheer disbelief. Nina saw calamity coming, but it was too late to back down. Her only hope was to get the whole story out in one rush and pray to God that he would listen, and desperately she tried but she wasnt even half way through the garbled words when Steve blew a fuse. Dismally now she tried to convince herself that he hadnt really meant most of the things he had said to her, but whether he had or not, the outcome was the same. Her only small comfort and it was very small was that she had successfully begged him not to tell their parents what had happened. He had agreed at last, but reluctantly, and with the condition that if anything like it ever happened again, hed be round at Mum and Dads with the whole story before she had time to draw breath.

He had warned her, too, to stay away from the Doctor, and Nina knew he meant it. Of course, she should have remembered that secrets are hard to keep in a small community. At one point or another someone had seen her coming out of the Doctors rented cottage; then tonight, when Steve was looking for her, one of the surfers had said she was on the beach earlier, and yet another person had just happened to notice her walking towards the cliff path with that older guy, the one she went to Jangos with. Oh, didnt you know about that? That was how Steve had found them on the cliffs. He would be watching her from now on, and so would most of his friends. It was an impossible situation.

All right, then. She would have to be careful about meeting the Doctor from now on

but that neednt stop her from trying to find out where Ruth had gone to ground.

Think, Nina told herself, stifling a traitorous desire to shut her eyes, forget the whole business and go to sleep. The Doctor had scanned the holiday chalets, and Ruth was definitely not there. No trace of her, either, at the old mine workings. But unless Ruth had been taking a very long walk indeed to get back to her headquarters, there simply werent any other logical possibilities. Admittedly old mines werent the safest of places, so that could well have put her off. And the Doctor had scanned it with that gizmo; it? anything abnormal was there, he would have detected it.

Or would he? Something he had said once before, about signals being blocked … Nina was no expert in mineralogy, but she did know that certain rocks and ore deposits could cause various pieces of equipment to give false readings. Iron had a strong magnetic field, for instance. Granite was faintly radioactive. Tin and copper were the main ores hereabouts, but there must be many others embedded in the ancient ground. Could they have deceived the Doctors scanner?

Nina felt the beginnings of excitement at the possibility that she could be on to something. She wanted to talk to the Doctor, right now but at one oclock in the morning that wasnt a feasible idea. Tomorrow, though early tomorrow, before anyone else was awake she would go to the cottage. No need to set her alarm; with this in her mind shed be lucky to sleep at all. Just a few hours, and they could find out if her theory was right.

She pulled the duvet up over her ears and tried, though without much hope of success, to settle.

It was only a little after four, but the sky was already lightening as Nina headed through the deserted village towards the beach. She had experienced one or two midsummer dawns before going to bed, but this was the first time she had actually got up at such an hour, and the silence and cool freshness of the days beginning were a pleasing novelty. Birds were twittering and squabbling in the trees as she hurried down the long hill, and the cries of gulls echoed up through the valley that led to the sea.

The Doctors cottage was in darkness and all the curtains were closed. Nina knocked, waited, knocked again, but there was no response from inside. She then tried tapping at various windows and even calling as loudly as she dared through the letter box, but nothing happened.

Either the Doctor was out, or more likely he was inside the TARDIS and had no idea that she was here. Nina considered trying to break in, but decided that it was too risky. A bedroom curtain had already twitched in the house next door; any funny business and the police would be here before she knew it.

She had two choices. She could wait for the Doctor, or she could go and take a look at the mine workings alone. It was no contest as far as she was concerned. And the thought that when she did get to see the Doctor she might have triumphant news to report was an added incentive. Nina set off, and within a few minutes was striding up the cliff path.

The sky had cleared overnight and the sun was up now; the beach area was still in shadow, but light was shining brilliantly on the water out to sea. The wind, though, was gusting hard, and the sea looked dangerous; the tide was low and the breakers roared and foamed on the beach as they rolled in. A telltale haze on the horizon told her that the clear sky would not last. Better make the most of this respite, before the next frontal system came in.

Nina reached the narrow entrance of the mine working. She had never ventured in before and the prospect of doing so made her feel faintly queasy. But there was a torch on her key ring a small one but powerful for its size, and she switched it on and peered inside. The interior passage was level for as far as the torch beam could reach, and when she shone it up to the roof she saw that the wooden ceiling props of the first section had been replaced fairly recently. Safe enough thus far. Come on, then. What are you waiting for?

She moved cautiously into the fissure.

The slit of daylight behind her started to shrink and fade almost immediately, then abruptly the passage took a turn to the left and the torch was her only source of illumination. Suppressing a strong urge to run back outside, Nina proceeded step by careful step, testing the ground under her feet, shining the torch on floor and roof and floor again, alert for any sign of danger. At first she counted her paces, but the need to watch for treacherous ground took all her concentration and before long she lost track of the distance she had covered.

She guessed very roughly that she must be about thirty metres into the workings when she came to the barrier. It was only a few slats of wood put up criss-cross fashion, a warning rather than a serious attempt to bar the way. But several of the slats were broken, and the

breaks looked new. Which meant that someone had come through this way very recently.

Nina felt a sharp thrill as she pushed past the barrier and moved on, shining her torch into the darkness ahead. The ground was rougher here, strewn with rubble and rock chips, and she knew she was breaking every basic safety rule by going on alone, with no protective clothing or equipment. But she was far too excited to turn back.

She wasnt stupid. Shed be careful. She was

Ahh! It was more of a gasp than a shout, and the speed of Ninas reflexes probably saved her life as the torch beam lit the black maw of a shaft in the floor directly in front of her. Even as the danger registered she was instinctively throwing herself backwards, and she hit the floor with a force that jarred her spine and winded her, but nothing worse.

Shit … The passage tossed the echoes of her whisper around and brought them mockingly back as she sat up, rubbing the small of her back. Thankfully she had not dropped the torch, and she pointed it again towards the gaping hole in the floor. The shaft was two metres wide, and at first sight it appeared that the tunnel ended at its brink, with no means of getting past other than by an unthinkable jump. But as the bright beam swung across the gap, Nina saw a narrow slit in the rock just before the shafts edge. A secondary tunnel, leading away to the right and wide enough for a slim person to squeeze through.

Go on, or turn back? Nina stared at the shaft, then at the new tunnel, trying to make up her mind. Not a living soul knew she was here, so if anything went wrong the consequences were too grim to contemplate. But the need to test her theory was a burning compulsion now. Listening, she heard a distant, echoing roar that seemed to be rising from the shafts depths. The sea? Experimentally, she tossed a small piece of rock into the shaft and listened to the diminishing clatter of its descent until ages later, it seemed to her there was the faintest of splashes as it fell into water far below. That confirmed her guess that the shaft was an air outlet. All right, then. She wouldnt asphyxiate if she went on a little further. Provided she was careful, provided she didnt make the mistake of trying to hurry again.

She got to her feet and, eyes and torch fixed on the shaft, edged her way cautiously to the tunnel. There was more leeway than she had first thought, and she slid through the gap to find herself in a narrower but still negotiable tunnel that sloped gently, steadily

downwards. Nina started along it. She was acutely aware now of the eerie sound of the sea, heard distantly through thousands of tons of rock. A rumbling vibration, rising and falling, and behind the rumble, in a weird counterpoint, a sort of humming, almost like machinery

Machinery? Nina stopped dead, listening with an awareness that was suddenly and acutely heightened. The humming was more machine than elemental. And there was a definite rhythm to it not random, but steady and regular. It seemed to emanate from somewhere ahead, but she didnt trust her sense of direction in here and she moved on with renewed caution, trying to make as little noise as possible. There was finer rubble on the floor now, almost like a coating of dust, and as she raised the torch a little higher to light the way ahead, she saw something that made her stop dead.

There were footprints in the dust. Not just a single trail but many of them, going in both directions. Nina crouched to examine them more closely. As she had guessed they were all the same size, and too small to have been made by a man. Someone was using this tunnel regularly. And there were no prizes for working out who it must be.

Then in the darkness beyond the torch beams reach she heard a noise. It was a strange noise, impossible to identify something between a groan and the hoarse rattle of a heavy, laboured breath. The echoes sounded bigger, too, as though there were a vaster space just ahead of her. And the tunnel was widening.

Nina took eight more paces before, with no warning, the tunnel opened out into a cave. She couldnt suppress a gasp as the torch lit up the walls and roof, for the entire space was streaked with an intense and brilliant turquoise blue, like a grotto out of an exotic fairy tale. Her reasoning self knew what it was copper sulphate, residue of the old mineral lodes but the sheer, unexpected beauty of it was breathtaking. There were ripple patterns in the rock, overlapping each other like wave-edges licking over sand, and the torchlight reflecting on moisture created a shimmer like scattered diamonds.

Nina said softly, Wow. For nearly a minute she stood motionless, simply staring, until recollection of her mission struggled back to the surface. All very well to go off into gawping raptures, but she had work to do reluctantly tearing her attention away from the blue glory, she pointed the torch across the cave, to see how far it extended.

It wasnt as big as she had thought: a long ellipse in fact, and the far

end no more than twenty or twenty-five metres away. Disappointingly, it was completely empty, but she could still hear the regular humming, and there was a dark patch in the far wall that might be the entrance to another tunnel. Nina started towards it. She had taken five steps when there was a quick, slithering sound behind her She whirled round in time to see the shape that launched itself from the dark. But she wasnt fast enough to dodge the spring, the buffeting impact, and the hands that clawed and clamped around her throat as she crashed backwards to the cave floor.

HAZARD

Ohhh, you bitch! Ninas hand whipped out and grabbed the other girls wrist as Ruths fingernails came slashing at her face. They rolled together across the cave floor, sharp stones digging and jarring. Ruth was screaming thinly, a weird, unnatural sound. Her feet scrabbled but Nina kicked her shin hard, throwing her off balance again before she could get a purchase. Then Ruths arms locked ferociously round her neck and Nina felt herself being pulled into a spine-straining bend.

No you dont Self-defence triggered instinctively and Ninas hands came together and up and out, breaking the hold. Ruth uttered another cry and fell sideways, sprawling; on all fours Nina scrambled clear, tensing for the next attack as her adversary started to get up

Ruth didnt attack. Instead, half way to her feet she stopped in a cramped, crouching position. Her hands clenched and flexed and she seemed to have trouble breathing; through the mess of her hair she glared wildly at Nina and hissed, Go away! Get out! She had started to shake violently, and a sharp scent came from her, like acetone but less pungent. Then suddenly she doubled over, clutching at her stomach. A rustling, clicking stream of sounds echoed through the cave as her careful English deserted her and she lapsed into incomprehensible babbling, and Nina realised that she was swearing with pain.

What is it? Panting, she took a step towards Ruth, but only one; this could be a trick. Ruth raised her head. The torch had rolled out of reach and was shining uselessly on a section of the cave wall, but enough light reflected from it for Nina to see her face clearly. She was shocked.

Ruths skin was grey, and her cheeks were blotched with silver-white patches that were beginning to flake, like fish scales. She was still struggling to breathe, and in alarm Nina recalled the Doctors warning about the speed of her deterioration.

Youre ill! She said it as though it were a challenge.

Ruth showed her teeth. No, Im not! Go away!

She made a sudden lunge, her hand slashing out a second time. Nina jumped back, and the lunge ended in a tottering stagger as Ruths legs nearly gave under her. Again they faced each other, and Nina struggled to get herself under control.

Look, she said fiercely, I didnt come here to fight with you but if you try to jump me again, then I dont care how sick you are, Ill knock you flat! Do you understand?

Ruths head jerked in a gesture that could have meant anything. She still glared, but she made no further move.

Right, Nina wiped strands of hair from her own mouth. Thats better. Now, I want a straight answer to a straight question. Why have you been hiding from us?

I dont know what you mean.

Oh, I think you do. Youve worked out that we know about you, and the Doctor said

Doctor? Ruth said sharply. Her eyes were suddenly furtive.

Yeah, the Doctor. You know who I mean, and youve been trying to avoid him right from the start. Well, now Ive found your hideaway, Im going to fetch him and theres nothing you can do to stop me!

She moved forward, intending to skirt round Ruth and head for the tunnel. But Ruth wasnt quite as weak as she seemed; as Nina passed she made a stumbling rush at her, crying out inarticulately. They collided, clashed, struggled; then, though she didnt mean to do it, Ninas reflexes took over and she hit Ruth back-handed across the face. Ruth screamed, spun and collapsed to the floor, where she lay prone.

Ruth? Nina stared down at her in alarm. Ruth, Im sorry! I was only trying to

Ruth, are you OK? Can you get up?

Ruth tried to rise, but collapsed again. Her entire body was shuddering uncontrollably; she writhed, and made a stuttering moan of pain.

Oh, God. Anger vanished under a surge of guilt and Nina dropped to her knees beside the other girl. Its all right, I didnt mean to hurt you and Im not going to do it again. Come on, lets see if we can get you upright.

She was appalled by the fragility of Ruths frame as she manoeuvred her into a semi-sitting position. Ruth didnt have the strength to protest, but as Nina tried to make her more comfortable she started to

whisper again in her own strange tongue. Then the words if they were words changed to an awful, long-drawn sound, almost like a dogs howling, and Nina realised that this, for Ruth, was the equivalent of a human being sobbing her heart out. It struck a chord in Nina, unexpected and unlooked-for, and she felt a suffocating pang as memories surged into her mind of the many, many times she had cried, feeling that there was nothing worthwhile left in the whole world. Yet with the rise of empathy came a rush of shame. Whenever some small thing went wrong in her own life she had indulged in misery and self-pity, thinking she knew what suffering was. She did not know. But Ruth did. Alone in an alien world, sick and weak and grieving for the death of someone close to her Ruth was suffering in a way that she, Nina, could not even imagine.

Her voice choked with an emotion she was only just beginning to understand, she said helplessly, Dont, Ruth! Please Ill help you. Ill do anything I can

Ruth said something that sounded like, C … cant …

I can, Im sure I can! If youll let me try.

Nn …Her head moved jerkily. I only want …

What? Nina pressed eagerly. What do you want, Ruth?

I w-want … Ruths throat quivered and another eerie howl began, but with a huge effort she quashed it. I want to … go home.

Nina wasnt wearing her watch, so she had no idea how much time passed before Ruths emotional storm blew itself out, but it was a nightmarish experience. The two of them sat together on the cave floor, their arms around each other, while the terrible howling sound went on and on. Nina had retrieved the torch and switched it off to conserve the battery, so the only light now came from faint phosphorescent patches in the rock around them. To her strung-out imagination they seemed to be fading slowly and letting the dark encroach, like the gradual closing of a huge prison door. The underground heat added another oppressive dimension, and Nina began to feel that time had stopped and the world would be this way for ever.

But at last the howling subsided and finally ceased, and the moment came when Ruth gently shook herself free and said in a voice that was almost normal, Im … all right. Better now. In the gloom her face was a dim, sickly-pale oval as she turned to look at Nina. Thank you.

Nina tried to smile. Thats all right. I understand.

Ruth stood up. She was unsteady, but some strength had returned, and she moved slowly towards the far end of the cave, where she stood staring at the patch of darkness Nina had seen earlier. It was a tunnel, as Nina had surmised, and as Nina also approached it the machine-like thrumming, which had been a constant if almost unnoticed background noise, seemed to grow louder.

I dont know what to do, Ruth said quietly. I just dont know.

You want to go home, you said.

I cant.

Nina got to her feet, wincing as cramped leg muscles twinged, and walked towards her.

Why not? She hesitated. I know how you came here. The Doctor told me about the spatial gate.

Oh, yes. That. There was a bitterness in Ruths tone which Nina didnt understand, and she persevered. Is it here, in the mine?

A nod.

Then

I cant, Ruth interrupted flatly. And anyway … Im too frightened.

Frightened to use your gateway? Ruth, thats crazy! Theres far more for you to be frightened of here! Youve got to go back youre sick, and the sickness will get worse as long as you stay on this planet! You must know

Of course I know! But Im still frightened. She hung her head. Because of what we did. What I did. I cant face telling them what happened to …

Your friend?

He was my … I dont know your word … We were … Ruth shook her head and made another of the eerie hiss-clicking sounds. Mated?

Oh, God, Nina thought. Very gently she said, We would say: you were lovers.

Lovers. Ruth repeated it, but to her it was clearly just a sound with no meaning.

She started to shake again, and the beginnings of another grieving howl vibrated in her throat, but with an enormous effort she stemmed it. I know it was his idea, but I went along with it. We broke the law, and he paid for that with his life. I heard him crash, Nina. We were communicating; I heard the flier fail, I heard him trying to control it, and then I … heard … She made a wild, jerky gesture with both hands.

He wanted me to fly with him that night. Just for fun, to see what your your coast was like. We couldnt do it in the daylight, of course … But I said no, I was tired and I wanted to rest. I wish Id gone. I wish it. Because if I had, then I would have crashed too, and be dead too, and that would be good because nothing would matter any more!

Ruth! Nina put all the energy she could muster into her voice, and its sharpness pulled Ruth up short. She turned round, her face a tight mask, and Nina said, Im not going to listen to stuff like that! Dont you think one deaths more than enough?

What about your family? Or dont you have families, parents, where you come from?

Ruths lip quivered. Yes. I have parents, as you call them. But after what Ive done … how can they forgive me?

Of course theyll forgive you parents always do! OK, your he, your he died, and thats horrible, and itll take a long time for both your families to get over it. But it wasnt your fault! The only thing you did wrong, both of you, was break some rules. Nina sucked in a deep breath. What would you rather do face up to whats happened and ask your folks for help, or make them totally miserable because youre dead? Get real!

Even as she said it, Nina could hardly believe that she, of all people, was lecturing someone else about the need to reach out to their family. Great advice, Nina so why havent you ever taken it yourself? She thought of her own mother and father, and of Steve. The arguments she had with them, the frustrations, her furious sense of injustice at their inability to understand. Yet how would they feel if anything should happen to her? And how would she feel in her turn, if any of them were to die?

The answer was clear, and absolute. Do it, Ruth, Nina said quietly. Reach out to your folks. Go home.

There was a long silence before Ruth replied, in a voice that was barely more than a whisper, I cant.

You can! Ruth, if

No. Ruth stepped back from the tunnel entrance. You dont understand. I mean, it isnt possible. I cant open the gate. Ive lost the key.

Key? Ninas mind conjured a picture of an old-fashioned lock and she had a hysterical urge to giggle at the idea of such an advanced device as a spatial gateway having one. Pushing the hysteria down, she said, What happened to it?

He had it with him when he made that flight. I didnt realise until later, and when I did … well, you can work it out, cant you.

Nina could. The key, and Ruths hope, was at the bottom of the sea, somewhere among the wreckage that had snarled Charlie Johnss pot lines.

Or was it? An awful possibility occurred, and she said, Ruth, what does the key look like?

Ruth shrugged, suggesting that the question was pointless. Nothing much. A …

cylinder, I think is your word. About that long, she said, demonstrating with finger and thumb, and you would call it silver.

It was the answer Nina had dreaded, and a queasy, sinking sensation clutched at her stomach. Steves pendant was the key. And last night, in a fit of anger, she had thrown it from the clifftop … Now, in a single devastating moment, she remembered the Doctors words during the confrontation with Steve, and realised what lay behind them. The Doctor had known what the pendant was. He had known, but he had not had time to tell her, and she … she had thrown away Ruths only means of going home.

You cant get it back, Ruth said wearily. No one can. She swallowed. I hoped it might be washed up on the beach. Thats why Ive been spending so much time there.

But its gone.

Nina didnt speak. She couldnt find the courage to confess the stark truth. Ruth had been closer to the key than she had ever dreamed, and it? only she had spent more time with Steve she might have seen and recognised the pendant before it was too late.

I think, Ruth said, that you should go away now. I think Id prefer it.

Go away? But what about you?

Ruths shoulders lifted slightly she had, it seemed, learned the habit of certain human gestures. I cant survive on your planet for much longer, she stated carelessly. A day or two more, maybe. But its all right. Im grateful for what you said, Nina, about my my family, and going home. I know you meant it for the best.

But even if I had the key, I wouldnt use it. She faced Nina fully, and her look showed everything that mere words couldnt express. I havent got the courage to go back. I just havent.

A mixture of fear, bafflement and the helplessness of trying to reason with someone who was being so impossibly unreasonable made Ninas voice shrill. You cant stay here and die! Its completely mad I wont let you do it!

There was a sound above them, a sort of sighing creak, as though the rocks and the old wooden props of the mine were expressing their agreement. Ruth stared into the tunnel again. Its my own choice. Nothing to do with you.

Oh, yes it is! If you think Im going to have your death on my conscience for ever, because I said “OK” and walked away, then you can think again! She flicked the torch on and stabbed its beam into the darkness behind her. Im going to find the Doctor.

If anyone can get you out of this mess, he can!

No! Ruth shouted. You mustnt tell him; you mustnt tell anyone! She made a convulsive movement towards Nina, but swayed, stumbled and had to clutch at the rock face to stop herself from sagging to her knees.

You cant stop me, can you? Nina said. Youre too weak now. Wait here. Ill be back.

No, no! Ruth reached a clawing hand towards her. Please, Nina! Let me die! She waved a frantic hand towards the tunnel. Ill do it in my own way my equipments down there; its where we made the gateway

Ill go back to it, Ill just wait. Itll be all right, its the right thing to do.

Forget about me, Nina. Leave me!

The mine creaked and sighed a second time, like a huge, half-sensate animal.

Involuntarily Nina cast a quick glance at the ceiling and when she looked down again Ruth had vanished.

Ruth! She yelled into the tunnel, which was the only place that Ruth could have gone. Ruth!

Ruth didnt answer, but a sound of hasty scrabbling came back from the tunnels depths. Cursing under her breath, Nina slid into the entrance.

This passage was much narrower than the one that had led her to the cave. The rock walls pressed against Ninas shoulders until she had to turn and sidle, crablike, to negotiate the tight space. Ruth was thinner and despite her weakness was getting through more quickly; the sounds of her progress, just discernible against the intensified humming, grew further away until, afraid of losing track of her altogether, Nina called out.

Ruth, listen to me! Theres nothing to be afraid of the Doctors a friend, he only wants to help! At least talk to him!

Theres no point! Ruths voice echoed back.

There is!

No! Suddenly the humming ahead swelled louder, and there was an ear-splitting electronic whine. It lasted only a second, but it made Ninas ears ring and she shook her head, gasping.

Ruth? Now there was only the humming again, but by contrast to the brief whine it was like silence. Ruth did not answer. Nina tried yet again. Please talk to the Doctor, Ruth! Its got to be better than

The rest of the sentence stuck in her throat as, from ahead and above, came an ominous groan. There was a tremor of movement in the rock

face at her back, and a small shower of debris pattered down from the ceiling just within the oval of torchlight.

Ruth … Stark fear flowered, and Nina dropped her voice to an unsteady hiss.

Ruth, somethings happening. The tunnel

The next noise was the moaning protest of wood bending under enormous pressure. It was followed by a deep, soft grumble, like a giant clearing his throat. More detritus fell, including two sizeable chunks of blue-veined rock. Nina felt panic begin and fought to quell it. Its just settlement, theres no danger; that godawful noise didnt disturb anything …

From the pitch darkness ahead came an echoing crash, and Ruth cried out in fear.

Ruth! Alarm made Nina forget caution. Are you all right?

Y-yes … But

If she said more, Nina did not hear, for a second throat-clearing grumble from the rock drowned her words then swelled into a noise like rolling thunder. The shattering of ancient wooden props was completely lost in the din, but as they gave way a Niagara of rubble cascaded from overhead, and the entire roof of the tunnel started to sag.

Run, Nina, Run! Get clear! Through the roaring in the tunnel and in her ears Nina heard Ruths scream. It pierced and snapped the paralysis of blind terror that had taken hold of her, and with a survival-driven instinct she started to scramble back the way she had come. Her feet slipped and slithered on a litter of stones, and the rock around her was shaking. Once she felt it squeeze her, crushing in, it seemed from both sides, and uttering a scream of fear and defiance and desperation combined, she struggled, pushing, thrusting, forcing her body to fit into the narrowing gap.

For two hideous seconds she thought she wasnt going to make it, but suddenly she was through, and running, running for sanctuary as the tunnel caved in behind her.

SOS

Ruth! Nina pressed her hands against the rock barrier in front of her, as though she could somehow find the strength to push it down. Ruth, can you hear me? Are you there?

She waited, listening, trying to ignore the dust that clogged her lungs and throat.

There was no answer; rationally, how could there be, when countless tons of stone and rubble now separated her from the alien girl? She couldnt even hear the humming sound now. All she knew for certain was that Ruth was somewhere in the tunnel, on the other side of the roof fall. Just hope and pray she was fast enough to get clear in time!

Nina was overtaken by a violent fit of coughing then as the dust in her throat became intolerable, and for half a minute she was doubled over, hawking and spitting to clear it. The effort left her breathless and sore-chested, and she realised that she needed to get out of there. The Doctor was the only one who could help now she had to find him!

But which way was out? When she shone the torch around, all she could see was a cloud of dust flung up by the disturbance and now swirling restlessly through the cave.

Hours would pass before it settled. She didnt have hours. Shed just have to grope her way back, and hope to God that she headed in the right direction.

Slowly and carefully, Nina began to feel her way around the cave wall. Her terror was subsiding and allowing room for some clarity, and now she had time to realise how lucky she was to have made it out of the tunnel before the entire roof came down.

Lucky, too, that the fall hadnt revealed a bigger rock flaw and collapsed the cave as well. Or at least, not yet. It could still happen. Goaded, she made herself move faster, horribly alert for a renewed rumbling, dreading to hear it, expecting to hear it. Please God, let me find the tunnel I came in by, and let it still be in one piece …

Her teeth were clenched so hard that her jaw was aching, but she was unaware of the pain until, with a shock, her groping hand found empty space, and a breath of colder, cleaner air whirled dust into her

eyes. She had found the tunnel! Now, all she had to do was follow it to the outside world. Hope rising, she directed her torch beam at the clearer air ahead and began to run.

She emerged from the mine a few minutes later, and ran gasping and blinking into the buffeting assault of a fierce Atlantic blow. She staggered, then sagged to her knees, gratefully gulping down huge breaths of air that forced the foul, dusty air from her throat and replaced it with a heady salt tang. Her heart was pounding under her ribs, and she knew that she had been incredibly lucky to make it back to the outside world.

Fool that she was, she had forgotten all about the shaft, and only sheer luck had stopped her from pitching straight down into it as she came out of the side passage and back into the main tunnel. But it had been the last hazard. Now she was safe.

But Ruth was not.

Nina climbed clumsily to her feet, swaying as the wind snatched at her clothes and hair. Then, fighting the protests of her aching muscles, she began to stumble down the cliff path.

Nina didnt care if half the village heard her hammering at the door of the cottage.

If the Doctor didnt answer this time, shed break in, shed

Nina? The door opened so suddenly that she nearly lost her balance and sprawled full-length into the hall beyond. The Doctor saw her white, strained face and grabbed her arm, pulling her into the house and shoving the door shut again. Whats happened? he demanded.

She told him in breathless, truncated sentences, and as soon as he grasped the gist of the story he hurried towards the living room and the TARDIS.

What are you going to do? Dizzily Nina followed him through the TARDIS door and watched as he started to hit controls and keypads. The timeship responded with a rising whine, and lights danced in rapid patterns across the console.

Co-ordinates, the Doctor muttered. I need co-ordinates. He swung round. Nina, have you got a grid reference for that cave?

A grid reference? No way! I know where it is, but

Not good enough! If Im going to use the TARDIS to get Ruth out, I have to have an accurate bearing, or we could materialise in the middle of solid rock.

Ninas jaw dropped. You mean, you can take this this thing to where Ruth is?

He gave her a hard glance. I can take it anywhere if I know exactly where Im going. Another rapid taradiddle on the keys; more lights danced, then a brief, ear-splitting whine made Nina jump.

No good, the Doctor said. I cant locate her. Theres too much interference from the composition of the rock it must be that that stopped me from finding her hideout in the first place. He swung to face Nina. The tunnel that fell in where does it lead?

I dont know, said Nina helplessly. She racked her mind. Though …

Yes?

I didnt keep track of the way the passage turned, which direction I was heading. If I had, I could be sure, but …

Never mind; no one could expect you to! But anything might help; just tell me what youre thinking!

Well … The second tunnel led off to the right, I know it did. And when I was in the cave, the other tunnel, the one that fell in … it was almost dead opposite .

. . I think, Nina said, crossing fingers and toes, that the air-shaft comes out in one of the sea caves.

The Doctors eyes lit up. Whereabouts? Do you know?

Ive got a rough idea. But you cant reach it; only a boat could get there, and the sea this mornings too wild

Can you see it from the cliff path?

Not see it, no, but the path goes above it

Show me! Then he hesitated. If youre up to it?

She nodded, though she wasnt sure whether it was the truth.

Grand! he said. Right lets go!

Is this the place? the Doctor yelled.

I think so! Nina shouted back. They were on the cliff path, about fifty metres beyond the stone wall where they had stopped the previous evening, and she did not want to look to where clumps of sea-pinks danced madly in the wind on the brink of the sickening drop to the sea. She dropped to a crouch it reduced the giddiness a little and pointed, still without looking, towards the heaving grey of the water.

There should be a group of yellow marker buoys about a hundred metres offshore.

Dont stand so close to the edge!

I see them. Ignoring her warning he leaned alarmingly outwards and peered down at the sea boiling and churning below. Nasty. Those rocks down there. I wouldnt give anyone much chance of surviving a fall:

She shuddered violently. Neither would I. Get back, will you?

Oh, dont worry about me. He leaned even further, and Nina shut her eyes, feeling sick with fright. Then he said, I think there is a cave there. Its almost directly below us, in the cliff face.

Probably! But there are several, so oh, please come back from the edge!

He relented and she heard him coming to join her at a safe distance from the drop.

Sorry, he said. I didnt mean to scare you.

Nina made an inarticulate noise and forced herself to open her eyes again. Now what? she said.

Weve got to find a way to get to that cave.

In that sea? You must be out of your mind! Look. She glared into his face. You wanted to see where the cave is. Ive shown you. But the only way to get any closer is by boat, and it? you tried it in these conditions, you and the boat would get smashed to bits, and youd probably wash up in Padstow next week!

What about the lifeboat?

Even theyd be pushed; especially now the tides turned! And we dont

know that its the right cave, or if it is, that we can even get to Ruth!

Youre right … The Doctor sighed heavily, a sigh of frustration. All right, then. Itll have to be Plan B.

Even when he returned to the cliff edge Nina didnt realise what he meant by those last words. But when he rubbed one heel experimentally on the brink, then dropped to a crouch and slid his whole foot cautiously over, the penny abruptly and horrifyingly dropped. What are you doing? Her voice went shrilly up the scale.

He smiled reassuringly. Dont worry! Im quite good at this sort of thing: Good? she spluttered. I dont care how good you are, no one can get down this cliff, its suicidal! Come back here!

He hesitated, peering down at the pounding sea. Im sure I can manage to reach those rocks …

Youll be in pieces on those rocks it? you try that stupid stunt! she yelled furiously. Get back! Just do it!

She thought he was going to listen and see sense, for he began to draw his foot back again. But then he stopped. He looked at her, a strange, elemental figure with the roaring sea behind him and his hair blowing like smoke in the gusting wind. Then he smiled, and Ninas heart turned over in disbelieving terror as his eyes revealed his intention. Im sorry, he said. But I dont really have any other choice.

He slid over the edge and disappeared.

No! Ninas scream was snatched by the wind and buffeted away like the cry of a soaring gull. She tried to struggle to her feet but the fear wouldnt let her stand up, would barely even let her move. Yet she had to move, had to see on hands and knees she crawled, scrabbling, towards the edge, then lay flat and, clasping at one of the tussocks of pinks, looked over.

Her stomach gave a colossal lurch as the view slammed into her brain. The sea was a rolling grey turmoil a sheer two hundred feet below, and the waves rolled in one on top of another, breaking on the rocks with thunderous power and hurling spray into the air. Incredibly, impossibly, the Doctor was nearly half way down the cliff. He was clinging to the rock face like a spider to a house wall, both hands and one foot anchored on projecting outcrops while his other foot groped for a new hold. Directly below him two breakers met and clashed; the spray went up like a waterspout and smashed against his back,

soaking him and almost knocking away his precarious grip.

Doctor! Nina was sobbing and she didnt know if he could possibly hear her above the roar of the surf. Doctor, for Gods sake come back!

He did hear her voice, if not the words, for he looked up quickly, hair dripping and sea water streaming from his clothes. … all right … she made out over the din.

… see the cave mouth … be able to … ah!

The last word was a yell of surprise as another, bigger wave exploded against the cliff face. Nina saw the water and spray start to rise, knew what was going to happen but there was nothing she could do, nothing that was of any use at all

The ricochet of the waves onslaught rose, shattered and fell, and the entire weight of the water came crashing down on the Doctors head. He vanished in a welter of white foam. Nina shrieked in horror, and then she saw him again; saw him lose his hold and go sliding and slithering away, down the cliff, down towards the rocks and the churning tide.

Docto-o-or! Tears blinded her and she pounded the cliff edge with bunched, useless fists. She couldnt look, couldnt bear to see him smash on the rocks and be swept away. All she could do was cry; great, rasping sobs that tore her throat and shook her body from skull to toes.

Then: … na! … Nina! Shocked, her eyes snapped open and she saw him. He was on a ledge no more than ten feet above the surf, his back pressed flat to the cliff and his feet braced against a rock spur. His white face looked up at her and he shouted again: … cant get back … have to try

The rest was drowned by the shatter of another wave, and he ducked as the spray came flying. In the brief lull before the next onslaught Nina yelled, Stay there! Dont try to move!

He shouted something else inaudible, then: … get down, and into the cave

No. she cried. Dont try it, dont! Then suddenly, as sometime happens in dire emergency, her mind was shockingly clear and she knew what to do. Filling her lungs with air she yelled at the top of her voice, Im going for help! Stay where you are!

Do you understand? Stay exactly where you are!

He heard her, acknowledging with a quick and perilous wave of one hand, then ducked again, shielding his head with one arm as the next breaker attacked. But Nina didnt see. She was on her feet, running down the path, running with all the speed she could force from her muscles. As she ran she snatched out her mobile phone and punched in the 999 emergency code.

Which service, please? The signal wasnt good and the operators voice crackled.

But it was enough. Coastguard! Nina gasped. I need the lifeboat fast!

TIDE-RACE

Nina heard the hiss and saw the smoking track of the first maroon as she pelted down the last stretch of cliff path towards the road. Moments later the gunshot bang of the flare echoed above the beach, then the second maroon followed. Briefly slithering to a halt, Nina glanced at her watch. Five past seven the crews pagers would have alerted them a minute or so ahead of the maroons, but most were probably still asleep when the alarm sounded. She should have enough time to get to the boathouse before the first of them arrived.

She sprinted on, reached the boathouse and hid just beyond it as the sound of the first car engine approached down the road. A blue hatchback slewed to a stop and Paul, the Ops Manager, jumped out and came running. Paul would have had the first alert from the coastguards and had fired the maroons from his house at the edge of the village. She held her breath as he hastily unlocked the boathouse, then as he snatched a key from inside and hurried to the adjoining tractor shed she darted past him unseen and ducked into the boathouse. Squeeze past the lifeboat, get to the racks of dry suits hanging in their places … She was of similar height and build to Geoff Parkes, one of the more experienced crew members, who hadnt yet shown up. Just pray he doesnt … Two more vehicles revved outside; one sounded like Steves van, and Nina snatched Geoffs dry suit from its peg and started to scramble into it. When Steve came running in, closely followed by a dark, rangy young man called Tim who usually drove the tractor, she had zipped up the suit, had crammed a helmet on her head and was flailing her arms into a crew lifejacket. All her brother saw was a ready crew member, anonymous in the gloom. He was about to say something but Paul intercepted him.

Someone stuck on a ledge at Derrys Head, he said. Too low down for the coastguards to get him from the top. Walker on the cliff spotted him.

Bloody hell! Steve glanced outside to the beach and the sea. Cliffclimbing in these conditions? He made an angrily despairing gesture. Mad!

Tell me about it! Paul, too, looked out. I reckon thats a Force 5, gusting 7.

Its right on the edge of our operational limit, Steve; if you think it isnt

safe to go

No., well do it. Maybe not it? the tide were higher, but we cant just leave the poor guy there, can we? Ill take senior crew … Adam, he said, to one of the new arrivals, who had a hooked nose and a rugbyplayers build, and … He scanned the boathouse, saw Ninas shape in the gloom. Geoff. And every launcher we can get!

Nina uncrossed her fingers and shut her eyes briefly in relief.

Steve started to put his gear on. Other crew were arriving now. Tim was starting up the tractor and bringing it round to hitch up the lifeboat trailer. For another minute or so the boathouse was a confusion of scurrying, scrambling, shouting figures. Everybody was always hyper at the beginning of a shout as tension levels rose and adrenaline flowed. The hitch was completed, chocks knocked away the tractor throttle opened with a roar and they were heading for the beach, the boat rumbling and bumping and the crew striding beside it. Nina strode with them. With her hair concealed by the helmet and her face blurred behind a visor no one had yet realised that she was not Geoff Parkes. She stepped out with the others, trying to look masculine and professional and trying to quell the hammering of her heart under her ribs. What she was about to do it? she could get away with it terrified her.

Surfing was one thing, and she had often been fishing in larger boats, but the prospect of facing that sea in a small inflatable D-Class, and helping with a rock rescue, was far beyond anything she had ever experienced. At the moment it felt unreal, for the helmet muffled sound and cocooned her in a false calm. But in a few minutes it was going to be very, very real indeed. Youre insane, Nina! an inner voice yelled at her. She squashed it, despite the fact that her stomach was churning like the tide. Im not going to abandon the Doctor! Think, girl, think youve watched dozens of launches; think what youve got to do

They reached the line of the incoming tide and the tractor swung in a wide arc to reverse the boat into the sea. The launchers were in position; an incoming wave lifted the boat off the trailer, and then they were all clinging to the grab-ropes, striving to keep her head to the sea.

Push her out a bit move! Steve scrambled in, lowered the outboard engine into the water; the others hung on as the next set of breakers nearly pulled the boat from their grasp, and Nina almost lost her

footing and went under. Gasping, she righted herself, braced her feet again. Steve was watching the sea, waiting for a momentary calm in the sets. Wait … Wait. Hold her … Then she saw him tense

Now!

The engine kicked to life with a chattering snarl, and Nina and the hefty Adam threw themselves over the rubber gunwale and into the boat. Nina felt as if a huge animal were humping up from the water beneath them; her hands locked round a grab rope, and a welter of spray flew in her face as Steve powered the lifeboat through the surf towards open water. The next seconds were a breath-snatching, bone-shaking roller-coaster as they met a new set of breakers head-on. Like a wild horse the lifeboat reared up, almost taking off from the surface, then it dropped stern-first with an impact that punched through Ninas spine and made her teeth snap together with shocking force.

Suddenly they were through the worst of it, the engine note slowing as they made their way into the swell and began to gather speed.

All right? Steve yelled, the question barely audible. Adam, who was in charge of the radio, gave a thumbs-up, and Nina tried to nod. She was still clinging on for dear life; if Steve had had time to look more closely he would have realised instantly that something was awry, but his whole attention was on the sea and the helm. They were clear of the bay now and turning to follow the coastline south-westwards; a break in the clouds let sunlight through momentarily and the sea lit up as though a searchlight were on it, while long shadows sprang out from the cliffs.

The panorama was awe-inspiring, but Nina was too intent on hanging on and not being hurled overboard by the boats pitching to pay any heed. She felt sick, and every so often the thought would flash into her mind of Ruths dead companion. She could begin to imagine, now, the terror he must have suffered as his flier went out of control and nose-dived towards the water. And she thought of the Doctor, trapped on the ledge with the tide rising ever closer.

The radio crackled and Adam crouched over it, striving to make out what was coming through. Nina heard snatches of his replies: Receiving, boathouse; over … OK …

five minutes, it? … what? Say again, Paul, over! More crackles, then: Yeah! Me and Geoff … What? He cant have!

Oh, hell, Nina thought. This is it …

Understood, Paul. Over … Yeah … will do! Over and out!

Adam screwed round and stared at Nina for a single second. Then he shouted at the top of his voice to Steve, Paul says Geoffs just shown up at the boathouse!

What? Steve visibly started. Then who He too flung a look at Nina; she met his gaze and his eyes widened as he saw her face through the visor.

Bloody hell! His voice rose to a roar of fury. What the blazes do you think youre doing?

I had to! Nina shouted, pleading and defiant together. Its the Doctor whos in trouble I couldnt explain, Steve, you wouldnt have understood! But I had to come!

Had to? Like hell! Im turning around, and Im taking you back!

No! she screamed. You cant the rescue

There wont be a rescue with you on board! You dont know what to do youd kill the lot of us!

I wouldnt! The Doctors there, Steve, he can help! And theres someone else trapped he was trying to get to her when he fell! She had just one chance to get through to him, and she shrieked in his face: Its Ruth!

Her brothers fury collapsed, and a violent clash of reactions flicked across his face. All the ingrained instincts of his training were telling him to take Nina straight back to shore. No matter what might become of the trapped man, she was a potential danger to the rescue; she was also his sister, and he couldnt stop himself from caring more for her safety than for that of a stranger. And though it was a lesser factor for him he would be breaking every rule in the book by taking an untrained, inexperienced, under-age individual on a shout. No matter that she had tricked him; he knew now, and the responsibility was on his shoulders. But Ruth …

Ruth was in danger …

Nina saw that he was in a dilemma, and pounced desperately on her last, slender hope.

Steve, Ruth needs help! she begged. There isnt time to go back! Ive handled other boats, I wont screw up please, Steve!

The lifeboat was still on her former heading, but she was pitching less violently now. Suddenly Adam said, Steve cant we chance it? If the guys on a ledge … the tides rising! And Derrys Heads lee of the wind the sea wont be so big there … Nina gave Adam a look of dazzling gratitude but he didnt see. Steve

hesitated. You reckon we can do it?

Yeah. I reckon.

Then … Steve drew a deep breath. All right! Get on the radio, tell coastguard weve got seconded crew. It wont stop the flak when we get back, but its something … Nina! Hold tight, do exactly what I tell you, when I tell you ! Shit, I must be mad!

Nina would never forget the wild run to Derrys Head. The details were a blur in her memory, but the sensations of the streaming wind, the flying spray, the vibration of the lifeboat and the slamming impacts on her body as they raced on the swell, all combined into a single adrenaline rush of fear, awe, exhilaration. She felt, too, a new level of love and admiration for her brother, who steered them on with a calm confidence that betrayed none of the emotions that he must have been suffering. She tried, once, to tell him what had happened to Ruth and to the Doctor, but Steve did not want to know. All that mattered was to reach them and get them to safety.

The effort of holding her station and keeping lookout for crab-pot buoys took nearly all her energy and concentration, but as they approached the frowning headland she stared ahead through the spray, frantically looking for the ledge where the Doctor

please God was waiting for them. Dont let him have done anything stupid; please dont let him have tried to get down to the cave

I see him! Adam bellowed. And there he was, a tiny figure against the massive cliff wall, waving vigorously to the oncoming boat. Steve swore incredulously. How the devil did he get down there?

He climbed! Nina shouted. He can do amazing things I tried to tell you before, but

Shut up, theres no time for that! Steve interrupted. Were going in get your head down, and stay down!

The lifeboat started to turn, and Nina crouched low and tightened her grip on an inner grab-rope as they bounced and juddered on the swell.

They were closing in; Steve throttled back the engine and they slowed to approach speed, with Adams eyes fixed unswervingly on the outlying rocks where the sea foamed and surged. Both men had known this stretch of coast all their lives and had a fearsomely healthy respect for it. Adam was searching for the largest gap between the rocks, where he knew they could get through with room to spare.

Theres the channel! he called to Steve. Starboard … bit more … OK, its dead ahead! Go!

The boat crept forward, nosing between the menacing dark points that looked to Nina like the dorsal fins of enormous, mutated sharks. Closer in, the cliff towered vertically above them, giving the illusion that it was toppling out of the sky. The Doctor had stopped waving. The tide was rising and his ledge was no more than two metres above the sea now; fountains of spray from every wave that smacked against the rocks soaked him afresh. To the right of the ledge Nina saw a cave mouth gaping

then she forgot everything else as, to her horror, the Doctor let go of his precarious hold and started to slither over the lip of the ledge. She screamed, Dont! and Adam started to bawl, For Christs sake, man, dont be so crazy

Another wave lifted the lifeboat and Steve took advantage of it; as the wave swept them forward he opened up again, intending to run the boat right to the rocks and make a grab for the Doctor if or, surely, when he fell. Ninas heart turned over as the cliff face seemed to rush towards them

And the Doctor sprang outwards in an astonishing leap that brought him crashing with a flail of limbs into the boat on top of Nina and Adam.

Cursing volubly, Steve fought to keep the lifeboat under control as Nina, Adam and the Doctor struggled to untangle themselves. Typically, the Doctor was the first to emerge from the confusion; shaking dripping hair away from his face he fixed intense and brilliant eyes on Steve, worked out who he was and the mood he was likely to be in, and did not waste any time with explanations.

Excuse me, he said politely but firmly, but this is an emergency!

Steve was taken so completely by surprise that he didnt have time to resist or even react in any way as the Doctor scrambled to the stern, clamped his hands on the tiller and turned it. The engine roared into

high revs and with the Doctor at the helm, it accelerated straight towards the yawning darkness of the sea cave.

Entering the cave was like being swallowed by an impossible mythical beast, as the morning light gave way to gloom and the sounds of the engine and the sea were suddenly and shockingly amplified. Nina had only just extricated herself from the tangle with Adam and was so shaken that she had not yet taken in what was happening.

She heard Steve shouting, then abruptly she was tipped over on to her back as Adam thrust past her and lunged for the Doctor. But in the rush Adam slipped. His balance went and he lurched sideways, snatching frantically at a grab rope as it seemed he might pitch overboard. Steve, momentarily forgetting the Doctor, scrambled to heave his crewmate back, and Adam flopped inboard to safety. As he landed on his backside, the sound of the engine dropped to a purr and the boat stopped moving.

The world seemed suddenly and bizarrely calm. The swell was still heavy, but no waves were breaking inside the cave and the mouth faced away from the wind. Something like silence held for a moment then Steve shattered the bubble explosively.

What the hell do you think youre doing? He swung towards the helm again then the tirade cut off as he realised that the Doctor was holding the boat hove-to with an expertise that at least matched his own.

Sorry, the Doctor said with a small smile. I dont like using force. But, as I said, this is an emergency. Oh, and dont worry; I know how to handle one of these: He made a minor adjustment to the tiller as the swell tried to carry the boat sideways. Is it possible to anchor here? I think well need to, if were to find Ruth. You do have an anchor on board, I presume?

Steves mouth worked like a stranded fish, and Adam could only stare, half convinced that this was a bad dream. Then Steve said, Where is she? Whats going on?

If Ninas calculation is correct, the Doctor said, shes in a mine adit that leads into this cave. And whats going on is that shes seriously ill; possibly injured into the bargain.

Steve, there was a roof fall! Nina put in urgently. I was there, and I

Well tell you the details later, the Doctor interrupted. Now, weve got

to get to her, and fast. Will you help?

I … Steve struggled with confusion and disbelief. This was too sudden and too crazy for him to make any sense of it this man could be a liar or a lunatic or both. But what if he wasnt? And Nina she said she was there. She had tried to tell him, and whatever else she might be, she wasnt insane.

And Ruth …

He heard himself say tersely, Yes.

REVELATION

The adit was there as Nina had predicted. The cave was a deep one, and at the back of it was a spit of sand that would remain above water level until the tide was more than half way in. Beyond the spit was a narrow tunnel mouth, and when Steve shone his flashlight into it they saw a rocky floor sloping sharply upwards.

They took what rescue equipment they could carry, and Steve brought the first aid kit. The Doctor made no comment; to try to explain, now, why Ruth could have no use for first aid would be a waste of valuable time. Adam remained with the lifeboat, which was beached on the sand spit and doubly secured with ropes. As the tide rose the boat would float again, and if the rescue took much more than an hour the water would be high enough to make getting out of the cave hazardous. By then though, as Steve pointed out, there would be no exit from the adit. Theyd be back in time.

Theyd have to be.

No one wasted breath in talking as they left Adam and the boat behind and set off up the tunnel. Steve led, with Nina behind him and the Doctor bringing up the rear.

Steve had wanted his sister to stay behind, but Nina would have none of it and the Doctor had backed her up. Steve gave way, but reluctantly and with a growing conviction that something was going on between these two that they were keeping from him. He would demand some answers, but later. For now, getting to Ruth was all that mattered.

The flashlight danced and flickered on endless walls of dripping rock and it was impossible to judge how fast they were moving, or how much distance they had covered.

Then, gradually, they all became aware of a sound. It was faint, almost subliminal, and none of them could say whether it had only just begun or had been present, unnoticed, from the start.

Steve stopped and whispered uneasily, Whats that?

Ive heard it before, Nina hissed. When I was in the workings with Ruth. She glanced at the Doctor. Is it something to do with … you know, her world?

Steve flicked them both a sharp look but the Doctor ignored it. My guess, he said in an undertone to Nina, is that its the gateway. And it sounds as if its not far away. Come on!

He moved past them both and hurried on. Steve and Nina hastened after him. Nina feared that Steve was going to start asking questions, but he didnt; the Doctor was setting a fast pace and he needed all his breath. So did she. The air in the adit was becoming thicker and staler as they moved further from the sea cave, and as well as being hampered by her hot and cumbersomely unfamiliar dry suit she was starting to feel dizzy from lack of oxygen. She ploughed on doggedly, trying not to be affected by it then a light appeared ahead that was not cast by the torch beam. It was a dull reddish, and it fluctuated and flickered erratically, like a neon strip on the verge of failing. It lit the contours of a curve in the tunnel ahead, and the Doctor was silhouetted by the glow as he stopped and waited for the others to catch up.

Suddenly Steves voice rang out, making Nina jump. God almighty, somethings on fire! He broke into a run. Ruth weve got to get to her!

Wait, Steve! The Doctor tried to bar his way, but Steve was well-built and fit. He shouldered the Doctor aside and disappeared round the tunnels curve. Then his footfalls stopped abruptly, and his cry echoed back.

Jesus Christ!

Nina and the Doctor exchanged a single glance, and pelted after him. The curve was ahead, the light brightened; they turned

And Nina too cried out as she halted with a jolt.

The tunnel ended abruptly, opening into another and much smaller cave and in the centre of the cave was the source of the glow. A translucent prism, some three metres high, hung in mid-air. It was turning slowly on its axis, and as it turned it pulsed, emitting the dull, rose-coloured glow like a slowly beating, crystalline heart. The thrumming sound was louder here, and a faint whine sounded on a single, high-frequency note that set up an ache in the bones behind her ears.

Steve stood rigid in the cave entrance, eyes bulging in their sockets as his brain struggled to cope with the image and assimilate it, and Nina stared too, open-mouthed with shock. Patterns were moving in the prisms depths. She could make no sense of them, for they were like

shapes in a distorting mirror, random, meaningless, but she was mesmerised, hypnotised

Suddenly Steve broke the thrall. What is it? The words came out in a dry croak that sounded nothing like his own voice.

Steve Nina clutched his arm, floundering for words, any words, that would even begin to explain. But the Doctor intervened.

Theres no time for that now! Look over there!

She followed the direction of his pointing hand. Directly beneath the prism, where bars of shadow confused the eye, lay a hunched, dark shape.

The Doctor strode towards it. Light flared around him, and as he approached he dropped to a crouch, ducked his head and reached out. Nina heard a thin hiss, followed by a groan that did not sound as if it came from a human throat. The Doctor muttered something she couldnt hear what then switched from English to a series of rapid clickings. Ruths alien language it was her; she was here, she

Nina! the Doctor called urgently. I need some help!

She threw a frightened glance at Steve, but he had covered his face with both hands and was shaking. Praying that he wouldnt recover and come after her, she strode to join the Doctor.

Ruth lay in a foetal huddle; she seemed to be conscious but only just. The Doctor took her shoulders, Nina her legs, and between them they eased her clear of the turning gateway. Ruths body was rigid and felt appallingly frail; as they laid her gently down on another part of the cave floor an acrid smell tainted the air and made Ninas nostrils curl.

Then she saw Ruths face, and forgot everything else.

The blotchy silver-grey discolouration had intensified, and Ruths skin was not merely flaking now but peeling in ribbon-like strips. Beneath it, the structure of a shockingly different entity was starting to show itself. Ruth was still wearing human clothes but their contours looked hideously wrong, as if the body beneath them had changed beyond recognition. Her limbs were spasming in small, stiff movements, and when Nina glanced at her hands she saw that they too were peeling, and that the alien hands beneath the disintegrating artificial skin were small, slim, and seven-fingered.

Nina felt bile rise to her throat. Barely more than an hour ago Ruth had looked almost normal, and now this the Doctor had warned her that the reversion would happen faster, but she had never expected

Nina! The Doctors urgent hiss brought her back to earth. Nina, snap out of it!

Weve got to get her away, and quickly!

Away? With a great effort Nina struggled free of the fascinated horror that had hypnotised her, though she was shaking. Where to?

He nodded in the direction of the revolving light. The gateways still operational

if it wasnt, the prism would have shut down. But without the key, its impossible to use.

Even for you?

Even for me. The only option is to get her into the lifeboat, and back to the TARDIS.

She swallowed. But what about Steve? When he sees her

Then, as though her words had acted as a jinx, a voice called, Nina? Nina!

Nina and the Doctor whipped round, and saw Steve stumbling towards them. What is it? He sounded wild, desperate. What is it, what have you found?

Steve, dont! With no time to think, Nina scrambled to her feet, holding out both palms to ward him off. Stay back! Let the Doctor look after her

She was too late; he had seen the hunched figure on the floor. Ruth? His eyes widened with fear and hope combined. Ruth! Brushing Nina aside as if she didnt exist, he dropped to a crouch at Ruths side and an instant later recoiled with a yell of horror. Oh, my God what is it?

What is it?

Nina tried to push him away, but he pushed back, hysteria rising. What is that thing? Where did it come from? Wheres Ruth?

Steve, listen! Nina pleaded. The Doctor

Stuff that! He flung her restraining hands away. What have you done? The Doctor was on his feet now, and like a bull Steve swung to face and challenge him. Where is she? Steves teeth were clenched with fury and fear; his chest heaved. You bastard if youve hurt Ruth, Ill kill you!

A cold, hard light flared in the Doctors eyes. His gaze locked with Steves and Steve stopped in mid-movement as some inkling of the truth got through to his subconscious. His mouth worked but suddenly he couldnt shout, couldnt even speak.

The hardness in the Doctors look didnt change, and his voice matched it as he said, You wont kill me, Steve. For one thing you cant, and for another you dont want to. Listen to me. This poor souls life is in danger. You cant save her, but I can.

Id rather you helped me by taking her back to shore in the lifeboat, but if you wont, then Ill take her myself and leave you here until someone can come back for you on the next tide. His mouth twitched. Im a peaceful man, but dont think I cant deal with any resistance on your part. I can, and will. Bending, he gathered Ruth into his arms. Its your choice. And … He hesitated, but only for a moment.

To answer the question I know you want to ask yes. This is Ruth. The real Ruth.

And if you really do care about her, then help me to help her, now!

RESTORATION

Adam was watching the tide and getting jumpy. The clearence between the sea and the top of the cave mouth was shrinking fast, and there wasnt much time left before it would be impossible to get the lifeboat out. The sounds of feet approaching down the tunnel gave him a surge of relief, and he hastened to help as the rescue party emerged from the adit.

The Doctor led the way, and for a startling moment Adam thought that the figure in his arms must be Nina, for it was dressed in a dry suit. But then Nina appeared, barefoot and in jeans and sweatshirt, and behind her came Steve with the flashlight.

Good timing! Adam said with feeling. Hows the casualty? Do we need

Nina. Lifejacket. Steve cut straight across Adam as if he hadnt spoken. And for him. He nodded cursorily at the Doctor, then strode to the boat and began to put his own jacket on.

Steve? Adam was perplexed. Whats up, mate?

Get ready to launch. Again Steve ignored the question. Helmet, Nina. He fastened his own lifejacket as Nina fetched her own and found one for the Doctor from the boats stowed supplies.

OK, but

I said, get ready to launch! Steve repeated ferociously. Adam recoiled, then looked at the others for an explanation. No one responded. The Doctor had laid his burden gently down and was putting the lifejacket on, but though Nina did catch Adams eye momentarily, her face gave nothing away and she didnt speak. Adam tried to peer at the drysuited casualty, whose head was wrapped in what looked like Steves sweatshirt, obscuring the face, but Steve snapped, No! Just follow orders! Even in the gloom Adam could see that the helmsmans face was dead white, and his eyes looked sunken with fatigue … or possibly something else?

The Doctor picked up the muffled figure again; it stirred feebly in his arms but made no sound. Nina was climbing into the lifeboat, taking what she hoped was the right station. Her face was still without expression. Adam hesitated. He looked at Steve one more time. Steve looked back.

Without a word, Adam followed orders.

A formidable reception committee was waiting on the beach when the lifeboat returned.

Through the spray that flew around her as Steve steered the boat into the outermost breakers and headed shorewards, Nina could see the Ops Manager and most of the crew, together with the Press Officer, several coastguards and two people in the green uniform of paramedics. An ambulance was parked up on the approach road, and gaggles of holidaymakers and locals were hanging around to see whatever was to be seen.

Nina glanced at her brother, but if he was reacting in any way to the sight he showed no sign of it. His face was still white, taut and expressionless, his lips were clamped shut, and what she saw in his eyes made her look quickly away again. Adam, in the bows, had carried out the necessary radio procedures as they motored back, but now was as silent as everyone else in the boat. All he knew was that they had broken every rule in the book to rescue two people (father and daughter maybe?) and that there was something disturbingly strange about the rescue that no one was willing to explain to him.

The lifeboat surfed in on a set of breakers. Steve cut the engine and shipped the outboard, then he and Adam leaped over the side as three launchers came running. They grabbed the boat, holding her straight for the trailer as the tractor backed it into the sea. Nina too jumped out, then Steve swung round, confronting the Doctor, who still sat in the boat cradling Ruth.

Give her to me. He held out his arms. His voice was on a dangerous knife edge.

The Doctor hesitated, then realised that to climb out of the boat carrying Ruth was not possible. Please, he said, so that only Steve could hear, dont let her get wet. Its vital that the water doesnt touch her.

Steve nodded once, curtly. He took Ruth as though she were made of fragile and precious porcelain and carried her clear of the sea. He kept his gaze averted from her face. The Doctor followed. When they reached dry sand he tried to take Ruth from Steve again; Steve started to resist, but Paul came running with one of the paramedics at his heels.

Theres an ambulance waiting, Paul said. Is she badly injured?

The Doctor turned a brilliant gaze on him. Shes absolutely fine, he said reassuringly. No need for ambulances or hospitals; were both perfectly well.

If I can just take a look the paramedic began.

I dont think so. The Doctors gaze moved to him, and the paramedic frowned uncertainly.

I really should

No need, the Doctor repeated. He still stared. The paramedic blinked, shook his head as though confused. Then in a single, smooth movement the Doctor turned, plucked Ruth from Steves unwary grasp, and started to stride away up the beach.

Hey! The paramedic snapped out of his trance and called after him. Where are you going? Just let me take a look, in case

He went after the Doctor, and Steve would have gone too, but Paul caught hold of his arm.

Leave it, hell sort it out! Paul was angry, baffled and concerned all together.

What the hells been going on, Steve?

Steve tried to pull away. Later, Paul! Ive got to

Not later; now! Anger was winning and Paul jerked him back as he made to go. What do you think you were doing, taking your sister on a shout?

I didnt know! Steve said desperately. She tricked me. She put Geoffs suit on, and look, Paul, Ive got to go and

No way! You are staying right here; Ive got the coastguard on my back, the Press Officer having kittens, and before I know it the Divisional Inspectorll hear about it and be down like a ton of bricks! You may have caused this prize screw-up, but Im the one who takes the flak! Suddenly from the corner of his eye Paul glimpsed a figure scurrying past, heading for the road, and he whipped round. Nina! Come back here this instant I want a word with you!

Nina paused. She wanted to defy Paul and sprint after the Doctor, who had almost reached the lifeboat house now. But her conscience hit her

like a slap from a heavy wave. She had started all this; she had got Steve into trouble. She couldnt just run away and leave him to face it alone.

She cast a helpless glance up the beach, hoping the Doctor would look back, see what was happening and understand. He didnt. Ninas spirits cascaded down into her wet feet, then she turned and trailed, shoulders drooping, to where Paul stood waiting for her with an apocalyptic expression on his face.

If people on their way to the beach turned to stare at the Doctor as he sprinted up the road with Ruth in his arms, he neither knew nor cared. All that mattered was to reach the cottage and do what needed to be done. And time was leaching away from him at a horrifying speed. His burden had no weight to her; she was a wraith, a shadow, still living but her hold on life now so precarious that even seconds could be the crucial factor in her hope of survival.

He kicked the cottages garden gate open with a force that nearly tore it off its hinges, and ran up the path. The front door was too strong for the same cavalier treatment and he put Ruth over his shoulder, cursing as he fumbled for the key and fitted it in the lock. Inside, into the sitting room, then another delay, maddening, nerve-racking, as he found the key to the TARDIS and wrestled the door open.

Ruth had been semi-conscious when he left the beach, stirring feebly and uttering small, meaningless sounds in her own tongue. Now, though, she was silent, motionless.

The Doctor laid her gently on a plush velvet chaise-longue. No time to ease off the drysuit, or to formulate a microcosmic environment to stabilise her calculating and preparing could take minutes, and minutes he did not have.

He swung to the TARDISs console and his brain shifted into top gear as his hands started to move rapidly on the controls. Co-ordinates time was flowing like a flooded river and everything seemed to take forever but there was no margin for error, there must be no mistake.

Ah! Relief dragged the gasp from him. He made a minor adjustment, then flung a look at Ruth. (She was still alive wasnt she?). He spared no thought for Nina or Steve or whatever might be happening at the beach at this moment. His hand made the final move and the TARDIS powered up.

The sound rose and fell, rose and fell, muffled from outside by the

cottages thick cob walls. A light appeared briefly in one of the windows, then it and the sound began to fade, and within seconds there was only the chirrup of birds in the cottage garden, and, a ceaseless backdrop, the sighing thunder of the sea.

Nina pounded up the road towards the cottage, cursing Paul, the coastguards, the Press Officer and everyone else who had delayed her for nearly three-quarters of an hour before the questions were finally finished and she was allowed to go. Steve was still in the boathouse. When she left he had been staring blankly out of the window while Paul, on the phone, tried to assuage the worst of the Divisional Inspectors fury. People were still hanging around outside and bombarded her with questions as she emerged, but she had pushed past them all and run from the boathouse. She had to get to the cottage, had to see the Doctor.

She barged through the gate, ran up to the front door and hammered on it. At the first impact of her fist the door swung open, revealing the unlit hall.

Doctor? Nina called. Doctor!

No answer. She stepped inside. All three doors from the hall were closed.

Subconsciously knowing the truth, but unwilling to accept it, Nina opened first the kitchen door, then the one to the tiny dining room. Both rooms were empty but for their bland, neutral furnishings. With a sick sensation in the pit of her stomach, she opened the third door, which led to the sitting room.

The TARDIS was gone. Dismay hit her like an avalanche, and Nina made a small, involuntary mewing sound as tears started to her eyes.

Then she pulled herself together, telling her mind to be logical. Of course the Doctor hadnt waited Ruth was desperately ill, and his first priority was to get her home to her own world, where her own people could take care of her. They were probably there now. But she had nursed her secret hope that maybe, just the once, he might have taken her with him. Just the once. Just so she could know what it was like.

She wiped her eyes, and a ghost of a laugh came out. Idiot. Stupid, over-romantic idiot. The Doctor would be back. As soon as he had seen Ruth safely home, he would return, just for a while, just to tie up all the ends and say goodbye.

Wouldnt he?

She turned to go, and saw something lying on a small table at one side of the room.

Pieces of paper, weighed down with a pebble that had a picture of a fishing boat painted on it. They sold those pebbles at the local craft shop … Wanting yet not wanting to know, she crossed the room, and had to make herself look.

The top sheet of paper was a note, addressed to the owner of the cottage. In an elegant hand, which had used a fountain pen, it thanked her courteously for a thoroughly enjoyable stay, and apologised for the abrupt departure, due to a sudden family crisis. The signature was an illegible scrawl that could have been any name.

And the pieces of paper beneath the letter comprised a bundle of ten-pound notes.

Nina stood by the table for nearly a minute while the tears streamed unchecked down her face. The sense of loss was almost too much to bear, and the realisation that the Doctor would not be back, that he had gone for good and did not care enough about her even to have waved or smiled a farewell hurt her as much as any physical pain. Her tears dripped on the note, smudging the writing, and she was still crying when through her misery she heard a sound from the hall.

She whirled, irrationally hoping to the see the Doctor standing behind her, and instead came face to face with Steve.

I thought you might be here. His voice sounded flat, like someone in the aftermath of shock.

I came to … But she couldnt really explain to him why she had come.

Theyve gone, havent they? he asked.

Yeah. The answer was clipped. She swallowed. Did Paul

Steve shook his head, negating the question. Ill tell you about it later. Nina …

is Ruth going to be all right?

I think so. He said she would be, if he could just get her home.

Right. Steve came into the room, looked restlessly around, and seemed

to be trying to steel himself to say something more. At last, he managed it.

What you told me … last night, after I found you on the cliffs with him, when I was taking you home … Its true, isnt it? Ruths an an But he couldnt bring himself to say the word alien aloud.

Nina nodded. Yes. Its true. And a wave of misery swamped her. She would have given almost anything if her brother could have been spared this; before the final confrontation in the cave she had hoped against hope that somehow he would be protected and never need to know the whole truth. But it wasnt possible.

Realistically, it never had been. And maybe, in the long run, it was better this way.

Steve said hollowly, Who is he? The Doctor … what is he?

I … sort of know, she said. But not really; not all of it. More tears started to fall, and Steve was crying too tears of shock and bewilderment and the sheer impossibility of understanding. Nina reached out to him and he held her and hugged her, each trying to comfort the other.

Youve still got your drysuit on, she said at last, in the foolish way that people focus on trivia at extreme moments.

Have I? Didnt notice. And youre soaking wet.

Didnt notice. She sniffed and hiccoughed and almost laughed all at the same time.

Mustve been the spray on the way back. Arent you cold?

Not really. Feel a bit queasy, though.

Delayed sea-sickness, probably.

Yeah. She giggled, then pressed her face against his chest.

Come on, he said gently. Lets take you home, and get you some dry things.

SAFE HARBOUR

A Sunday morning meant lifeboat practice as usual. Todays training would be a doddle sun shining in a cloudless sky, sea calm and tide low. The biggest hazard, as one of the crew said, would be making sure that the tractor didnt run over anyones dog on the way to the waters edge.

Steve was very subdued, but that was only to be expected. He hadnt said much about his private interview with the Divisional Inspector, but it was widely reported that he had been hauled over the coals and was in for an official reprimand. Whether it would go further than that no one knew, but Nina had asked to see the Inspector herself, and (so ran the gossip) had told him in no uncertain terms that she was to blame for the whole thing. That had put her up a good few notches in peoples estimation. Very mature, they said. Very honourable. God knows why she did it in the first place, but well done to own up didnt know she had it in her.

Nina was at the beach this morning, but she had kept away from the lifeboat house.

The crew had got to the teasing stage and now ribbed her mercilessly each time she saw them, so she had found her favourite vantage point among the rocks and was content just to watch the general activity on the beach. Steve was taking advantage of the calm conditions to send a trainee helmsman out with two of the older crew; as the lifeboat motored away from the beach Nina watched her brother walking slowly back towards the boathouse, stopping every so often to answer the questions of interested visitors. All things considered, she thought that Steve had come to terms with the situation pretty well. They had had more than one very long talk in the past few days, and he now knew all that she could tell him about Ruth and the Doctor. She still wasnt entirely sure that he believed it all Steve had one of those minds that could block out information if it became too uncomfortable or improbable but what he did believe, he was dealing with in his own way. The blisters on his hands had faded, and his energy levels were up

 he was eating like a hog, too, which proved he was getting back to normal.

And me?

She didnt really know the answer to that question, and wasnt sure that she wanted to. Maybe in a few weeks shed think harder about it, but for now it was too recent and too raw, and the disappointment maybe even the sense of anticlimax still hurt.

She blinked suddenly, told herself that it was the sun in her eyes, and reached for her baseball cap to put it on and shade her face. Then she stopped, her gaze fixed abruptly on three figures who were walking across the beach.

She had noticed them as they came down to the sand a few minutes ago not for any particular reason but simply in the idle way of observation. Possibly, too, because one of them, a man, was wearing white clothes and a floppy sun hat, and that had given rise to a pang of memory. Now, though, she looked more carefully.

There was something about the way that man walked. And his hair … long, brown and curling, almost Byronesque …

Ninas heart gave a colossal, thudding leap under her ribs, and she scrambled off the rock so fast that she grazed her heels and elbows. Unaware of it, she jumped down to the sand and sprinted in the direction of the trio. One of them saw her; they all stopped, looked

Nina! She uttered a wordless yell of delight and hurled herself into the Doctors arms.

Hey! He swung her round, almost losing his balance, then dropped her back on her feet and held her at arms length. His companions smiled politely but said nothing, and all Nina could do was gasp over and over again, You came back, you came back!

Of course I did. Did you expect anything else? He let her go at last and smiled into her eyes. Im sorry about my abrupt departure, but I know you understand Yes, yes, of course I do! She hadnt doubted it for a moment, she lied to herself; how could she have done? Oh, Im so glad to see you! Flatterer!

The Doctor glanced at the crowded beach. Is Steve anywhere around?

Over there. She nodded.

Ah, good. When I saw the lifeboat go out I was afraid we might have missed him. I have two friends here, Nina, who want to meet you both. May I introduce … He extended a hand towards the politely smiling couple, Ruths parents?

Nina did a double-take. She should have thought of it, of course; should have guessed but they had looked like any ordinary people, and in her excitement at seeing the Doctor it hadnt even occurred to her to wonder who they were.

Oh! she said. I, er, hello.

Hello, Nina. The woman or at least, she looked like a woman extended a hand.

We are very glad to see you.

And to thank you for what you did for … The male uttered a hiss-clicking sound that, Nina belatedly realised, must be Ruths real name. Now they were at close quarters she realised that there was something strange about them. Both wore sunglasses, hiding their eyes. Both wore hats, and what she could see of the hair beneath looked artificial, suggesting that their disguise was more cursory and more temporary than Ruths had been.

How is … Ruth? She resorted to the alias, knowing she could never wrap her tongue around their language.

Recovering and regenerating, the female told her. We are all greatly grieved by the death of here came another hiss-clicking but she, at least, is safe.

And aware that she has done wrong, the male put in.

Ah … Nina looked down at her feet, then squared her shoulders and faced them again. Please … dont be too angry with her. I know she shouldnt have done what she did, but shes suffered enough already, without …

Her voice tailed off as she realised what she was doing. Lecturing an alien

sticking her oar into something that was, literally, worlds apart from human standards and culture. It was crazy, ridiculous; she had no right.

I think, the Doctor said gently, that we all understand you, Nina. And theres no need for you to worry. To Ruths parents he added, Nina, like Ruth, is young, and … well, perhaps something of a rebel.

Rebel … The male paused, thinking, then smiled. Ah, yes. It is a trial

that we all undergo.

And is sometimes hard to remember when we grow older, said the Doctor, returning the smile.

Do not fear, the female told Nina. There will be no punishment. As you say, she has suffered enough. She held out her hand again, and clasped Ninas fingers for longer this time. We will always be grateful, and we will always remember you. And now, I think we should speak with your brother.

Nina stood very still as the Doctor led the alien pair away to find Steve. She watched them approach him, saw him start at the sight of the Doctor and then start a second time as the visitors were introduced. Her teeth were clamped hard on her lower lip but she didnt notice the pain. Strange, strange, strange. She couldnt grasp hold of it all yet. Possibly she never would. Steve was talking with them now, and the Doctor was moving away, suggesting that what they had to say was not for anyone else to overhear. He came back, and she waited, not moving, until he reached her.

Steves all right. It was a statement, not a question.

Nina nodded. We talked … A lot.

Im glad. She thought that, probably, he had picked up the additional implication in her words. She and Steve were closer now than they had ever been, and Nina had the new and slightly bewildering conviction that in the past few days both of them had done a lot of growing up.

Theyre … nice, she said, feeling suddenly awkward. Ruths people, I mean.

Yes, they are. It was important to them to thank you and Steve personally.

She nodded. Did you bring them?

In the TARDIS, yes.

Where have you … She almost said parked then realised how ludicrous that sounded. The Doctor grinned. Oh, somewhere or other. Dont worry, it wont be found.

Anyway, we shant be staying long.

She said, Oh, and swallowed back the disappointment.

Theyve removed the gateway, he told her. If anyone digs through the fallen rock and opens the workings again, theyll find nothing.

Right. Nina sensed that he was gazing at her but she stared at the sand again and wouldnt look up. She didnt know whether they would reopen the workings or not, and at the moment didnt care.

As for the wreck of the flier, he went on, theres no need to worry. It will have started to disintegrate by now, and it wont take long to disappear completely.

Sure. She could still feel him watching her, and her lower lip quivered.

So therell soon be nothing left, said the Doctor, very quietly.

That did it. Nina put the back of one hand to her mouth and made a choking sound, then before she could stop the impulse she had looked up and into his eyes. What she saw almost undid her completely. The Doctor was gazing at her with that bright, intent gaze she had come to know and in the gaze was a wistful sadness that almost matched her own.

Oh dear, he said. I think you hate farewells as much as I do. We really are a pair, arent we?

The tension between them snapped as Nina choked again and then the choking became laughter as she put her arms around the Doctors waist and hugged him with all the strength she could put into it.

I must go, he said at last. Ruths people cant stay much longer; they only made the minimum of survival adjustments. Say goodbye to Steve for me, eh? And … look after yourself.

I will. She rubbed a hand quickly over her face. And you.

Depend on it. Goodbye, Nina.

Good … But she couldnt quite bring herself to complete the word; it seemed too final. Dont start crying again, you pathetic idiot! She held a hand up in salute as he started to walk away. Then, abruptly, he stopped and looked back.

By the way, I owe you something.

What? she called, nonplussed.

He grinned. Dinner. Our first attempt didnt work out as planned, remember? The grin broadened. Jangos again? Next time? Dont forget!

Nina watched him go, watched him rejoin his companions and kept watching as the three of them left the beach. Out on the sand, near the low tideline, a solitary figure stood staring out to sea. Steve. She started to walk in his direction, slowly and a little hesitantly. He had not turned round, was unaware of her approach, and she stopped a short way from him, at the tideline where the gentle edges of the waves encroached, slowed, faded and merged into the wet sand. The seas noise was like a song, strange and wordless and as alien in its way as Ruths impenetrable, other-worldly language. For perhaps a minute, perhaps two, Nina looked out at the sea as Steve was doing, her thoughts acknowledging its power, her eyes drinking in its beauty, her spirit alive to all that it meant to her: its ever-changing moods, its unpredictable dangers, its inscrutable, immovable presence in her life … She seemed to feel the tide ebbing and flowing in her veins, quietly, peacefully. It was a strange, strange feeling, but a good one.

Steve looked round then, and saw her. For a moment his expression was tight, sad

but then, gradually, the muscles relaxed and the look changed to something else. The ghost of a smile appeared on his lips, and Nina felt a warm emotion rise and flower.

Smiling back, she walked through the small wave edges to join him.

AUTHORS NOTE

This story, of course, is fiction, which brings me to a point that must be stressed.

In

the final chapters my characters have broken nearly every safety and procedure rule that the Royal National Lifeboat Institution has for extremely good reasons set in place. In a work of imagination, and for the sake of dramatic tension, this is just about allowable; in the real

world, though, the skilled and courageous volunteers who crew the lifeboats would react to Ninas trickery in a very different way. So I offer thanks to Cas for sternly (but nicely) correcting me when I got things wrong, and to Guy for his invaluable help with the diving details and acknowledgements and apologies to our local lifeboat crew for the liberties Ive taken with a service that they know far better than I can ever hope to do. If Ive made any huge howlers, they have my full permission to dunk me in the sea next time I meet them on the beach! (Though preferably on a warm, sunny day … please?) If anyone would like to make a donation to the RNLI, the address to write to is: The Royal National Lifeboat Institution West Quay Road Poole Dorset BH 15 1 HZ (Registered Charity Number 209603)
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For as long as I can remember, my two greatest dreams were to be a teller of stories, and to live in Cornwall. I achieved the first of those ambitions in 1973, at the age of 20, when my first fantasy novel, The Book of Paradox, was published in the USA and Britain. Ive since published more than fifty novels, and the ideas are still flowing as strongly as ever. Then in 1998, I finally fulfilled my second dream, when I moved with my artist partner, Cas Sandall, to the north Cornish coast.

But to basics: I was born in Hertfordshire on 29th May 1952, and am a typical scatterbrained Gemini. I spent most of my school years writing stories when I should have been concentrating on lessons, and by the time I left school I had completed two embarrassingly bad novels. I worked, firstly, as a secretary (again, writing stories when I should have been typing letters) and later, after moving to London, as a paperback blurb-writer, which was much more my sort of thing. In 1977, with 6 novels published (if not exactly best-sellers!) I went freelance, and supplemented my writing income with copy-editing and proofreading.

My big break came in 1984, when my then agent persuaded me to expand and re-write my second book, Lord of No Time, into a trilogy The Time Master. To my delight, and with the boost of three stunning Robert Gould covers, Time Master was a great success on both sides of the Atlantic, and in the next 10 years I wrote and published 15 more fantasy novels, including the Indigo series and a prequel and sequel to Time Master. I also started to write childrens and Young Adult novels, and it astonishes me to look back and realise that Ive completed 20-odd books in this field, as well as another four adult fantasy novels.

Makes me wonder how I ever found time to eat and sleep!

I do make time for other things now, though. Cas and I met in 1994, and soon agreed that, much as we loved London, it was no longer the place for us. We moved to Worcestershire, where I have family, but we hankered after the sea. I suspect weve both got a good helping of salt water in our veins as well as blood Cas used to be a senior Merchant Navy officer, and me; well, Im at my best and happiest at the coast. So why resist the inevitable? We did what we had both always wanted to do: headed SouthWest.

Cornwall has a magical quality of its own, and is now truly home to us both. We married within a year of moving here, and we live within sound of the sea and ten minutes walk of the beach, in a timber house with our deaf, eccentric white cat, Spike, an old car, a small sailing dinghy, a garden full of plants and wildlife, and a lot of inspiration. When Im not writing, I love to cook, sing (pretty good), play guitar (not bad) or piano (hmm, well …), garden, beachcomb, catch tiddlers in rock pools (Im old enough now not to worry about seeming childish; it? anyone looks askance, I just pretend Im a marine biologist doing vital research!), go sailing with Cas (hes good at it, Im a muddle-headed beginner, but I will get there) and mess around in the surf with my boogie-board when the waters warm enough.

Inspiration: yes, theres plenty of it. Enough to keep me writing well into my dotage. Which I fully intend to do.

Louise Cooper can be visited online at www.louisecooper.com